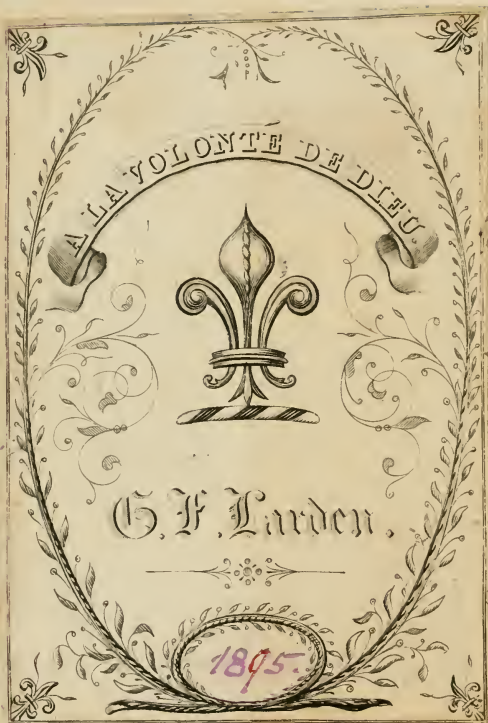


BARABBAS

A DREAM OF THE WORLD'S TRAGEDY

MARIE CORELLI



Geo. Lardner
1895

WHO IS MARIE CORELLI?

This question, which has been so often asked of late, is answered by Mr. Haweis in the first number of "The Temple Magazine." Marie Corelli, he says, is of Italian extraction, and the name which some people suppose to be a *nom de plume*, is only her rightful and legal appellation. She was adopted in early infancy by the late well-known author, Dr. Charles Mackay, and became a member of his family, though she is in no way connected with it by any tie of blood relationship, and she was educated almost entirely in England, with the exception of two or three years passed in a French convent. She received a very excellent training in the classics, and in French, Italian, and English literature, but her chief studies were directed towards music.

Circumstances occurring to herself presently led her to write her first book, "A Romance of Two Worlds." It was published ten years ago, when she was little more than a girl, and was still engaged in the various studies which are judged requisite for the "finish" of a woman's education. Only four short press criticisms appeared on the book, and they were all unfavourable. But it created so much public interest that it decided her to abandon the musical career for literature. Since that time her success has gone on steadily increasing, and she considers this merely the result of her own passionate love for the profession of literature. "If I could not earn a penny by it, I should still write, and still love writing," she says. "The true end of literature is the attainment of power, not the piling up of cash." She has lived in the house where she now resides, in Longridge-road, Kensington, ever since the publication of her "Romance." All of her books have been written there. She is of medium height, and rather what the French call *petit* and *spirituelle*; but when one converses with her, the quick sensibility, the decisive tone, the natural passion, the unconventional idea, proclaims the woman of genius.

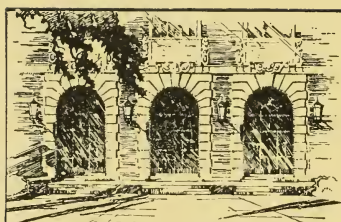
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BARABBAS

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‘And they consulted how they might take Him, *by subtilty.*’
—*Matthew xxvi. v. 4.*

BARABBAS

A DREAM OF THE WORLD'S TRAGEDY



BY

MARIE CORELLI

AUTHOR OF

'THELMA' 'A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS' 'ARDATH'

'VENDETTA!' 'WORMWOOD: A DRAMA OF PARIS'

'THE SOUL OF LILITH'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I

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‘And they had then a notable prisoner called Barabbas.’—*Matthew xxvii. v. 16.*

‘One named Barabbas which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him.’—*Mark xv. v. 7.*

‘Barabbas, who for a certain sedition made in the city and for murder was cast into prison.’—*Luke xxiii. v. 19.*

‘Now Barabbas was a robber.’—*John xviii. v. 40.*

BARABBAS

A DREAM OF THE WORLD'S TRAGEDY



I

A LONG sultry Syrian day was drawing near its close.

The heavy heat was almost insupportable, and a poisonous stench oozed up from the damp earth-floors of the Jewish prison, charging what little air there was with a deadly sense of suffocation. Down in the lowest dungeons complete darkness reigned, save in one of the cells allotted to the worst criminals ; there, all through the slow hours a thin white line of light had persistently pierced the thick obscurity. It was the merest taper-flame reflection of the outside glowing Eastern sky, yet narrow as it was, it had vexed the eyes of the solitary prisoner on whom it fell, and

he had turned from its hot flash with a savage curse and groan. Writhing back as far as his chains would allow, he covered his face with his manacled hands, pressing his eyelids down, and gnawing his lips in restless fury till his mouth was bitter with the taste of his own blood. He was seized with such impotent rages often. He mentally fought against that poignant light-beam cutting like a sword through deep darkness,—he regarded it as a positive foe and daily source of nervous irritation. It marked for him the dismal time,—when it shone he knew it was day, —when it vanished, it was night. Otherwise, whether minutes or hours passed, he could not tell. His existence had merged into one protracted phase of dull suffering, varied with occasional fits of maniac ferocity which only relieved him for the moment and left him more stupefied and brutish than before. He had no particular consciousness of anything except of that needle-pointed ray, which falling obliquely upon him, dazzled and hurt his eyes. He could have endured the glare of the Syrian sun in the free and open country,—no one better than he could have turned a bold gaze to its amber flame radiating

through the vast blue dome of ether,—but here and now, that thin shaft of brightness pouring slantwise through the narrow slit in the wall which alone served as an air-passage to the foul den in which he was caged, seemed an aggression and a mockery. He made querulous complaint of it, and, huddling on his bed of dirty straw in the furthest darkness, refreshed himself anew with curses. Against God and Fate and man, he railed in thick-throated blasphemies, twisting and turning from side to side, and clutching now and again in sheer ferocity at the straw on which he lay. He was alone, yet not altogether lonely, for close beside him where he crouched like a sullen beast in the corner there was a crossed grating of thick iron bars, the only air-aperture to the neighbouring cell, and through this there presently came a squat grimy hand. After feeling about for a while, this hand at last found and cautiously pulled the edge of his garment, and a faint hoarse voice called him by name :

‘Barabbas!’

He turned with a swift savage movement that set his chains clanking dismally.

‘What now?’

‘They have forgotten us,’ whined the voice. ‘Since early morning they have brought no food. I am perishing with hunger and thirst! Ah, I would I had never seen thy face, Barabbas, or had aught to do with thine evil plotting!’

Barabbas made no answer.

‘Knowest thou not,’ went on his invisible fellow-felon, ‘what season this is in the land?’

‘How should I know!’ retorted Barabbas disdainfully. ‘What are seasons to me? Is it a year or years since we were brought hither? If thou canst tell, I cannot.’

‘’Tis eighteen months since thou didst slay the Pharisee,’ replied his neighbour with marked malignity of accent,—‘And had it not been for that wicked deed of thine, we might have missed this present wretchedness. Verily it is a marvel we have lived so long, for look you, now it is Passover.’

Barabbas uttered no word, either of surprise or interest.

‘Rememberest thou the custom of the Feast?’ pursued the speaker, ‘How that one captive chosen

by the people shall be set at liberty? Would that it might be one of us, Barabbas! There were ten of our company,—ten as goodly men as ever were born in Judæa, always excepting thee. For thou wert mad for love, and a frenzied lover is the worst of fools!’

Barabbas still kept silence.

‘If innocence hath any merit,’ continued the voice behind the grating anxiously, ‘then perchance the choice will fall on me! For am I not an innocent man? The God of my fathers knoweth that my hands are not stained with the blood of the virtuous; I slew no Pharisee! A little gold was all I sought’——

‘And didst thou not take it?’ rejoined Barabbas suddenly and with scorn,—‘Thou hypocrite! Didst thou not rob the Pharisee of all he had upon him even to his last jewel? Did not the guard capture thee in the very act of breaking with thy teeth the gold band from his arm ere the breath left his body? Cease thy prating! Thou art the worst thief in Jerusalem and thou knowest it!’

There was a sound behind the bars as of something between a grunt and a snarl, and the squat hand

thrust itself through with vicious suddenness, to be as suddenly withdrawn. A pause ensued.

‘No food all day!’ moaned the voice again presently,—‘And not a drop of water! Surely if they come not I shall die! I shall die in this darkness,—this dense pitch blackness’—and the faint accents grew feebly shrill with fear,—‘Dost thou hear me, thou accursed Barabbas? I shall die!’

‘And so there will be an end of thee,’ returned Barabbas indifferently,—‘And those who hoard gold in the city can sleep safely henceforth with open doors!’

Out came the ugly hand again, this time clenched, giving in its repulsive shape and expression a perfect idea of the villainous character of its unseen owner.

‘Thou art a devil, Barabbas!’ and the shadowy outline of a livid face and wild hair appeared for an instant against the grating,—‘And I swear to thee I will live on, if only in the hope of seeing thee crucified!’

Barabbas held his peace, and dragged himself and his clanking chains away from his spiteful fellow-prisoner’s vicinity. Lifting his eyes distrustfully he

peered upwards with a smarting sense of pain,—then heaved a deep sigh of relief as he saw that the burning arrowy line of white radiance no longer lit the cell. It had changed to a beam of soft and dusky crimson.

‘Sunset!’ he muttered. ‘How many times hath the sun gone down and risen since I beheld her last! This is the hour she loves,—she will go with her maidens to the well behind her father’s house, and underneath the palm-trees she will rest and rejoice, while I,—I,—O God of vengeance!—I may never look upon her face again. Eighteen months of torture! Eighteen months in this tomb and no hope of respite!’

With a savage gesture he rose and stood upright; his head almost touched the dungeon ceiling, and he stepped warily, the heavy fetters on his bare legs jangling harshly as he moved. Placing one foot on a notch in the wall he was able to bring his eyes easily on a level with the narrow aperture through which the warm fire-glow of the sunset fell, but there was little to be seen from such a point of observation. Only a square strip of dry uncultivated land belonging to the prison, and one solitary palm-tree lifting its

crown of feathery leaves against the sky. He stared out for a moment, fancying he could discern the far-off hazy outline of the hills surrounding the city,—then, too faint with long fasting to retain his footing, he slipped back and returned to his former corner. There he sat, glowering darkly at the rose-light reflected on the floor. It partially illumined his own features, bringing into strong prominence his scowling brows and black resentful eyes,—it flashed a bright life-hue on his naked chest that heaved with the irregular and difficult breath of one who fights against long exhaustion and hunger-pain,—and it glittered with a sinister coppery tint on the massive iron gyves that bound his wrists together. He looked much more like a caged wild beast than a human being, with his matted hair and rough beard,—he was barely clothed, his only garment being a piece of sackcloth which was kept about his loins by means of a coarse black rope, twisted twice and loosely knotted. The heat in the cell was intense, yet he shivered now and then as he crouched in the stifling gloom, his knees drawn nearly up to his chin, and his shackled hands resting on his knees, while he stared with an owl-like

pertinacity at the crimson sunbeam which with every second grew paler and dimmer. At first it had been an ardent red,—as red as the blood of a slain Pharisee, thought Barabbas with a dark smile,—but now it had waned to a delicate wavering pink like the fleeting blush of a fair woman,—and a great shudder seized him as this latter fancy crossed his sick and sullen mind. With a smothered cry he clenched his hands hard as though assailed by some unendurable physical pang.

‘Judith!—Judith!’ he whispered, and yet again—
‘Judith!’

And, trembling violently, he turned and hid his face, pressing his forehead close against the damp and slimy wall. And thus he remained, motionless,—his massive figure looking like a weird Titanesque shape carved in stone.

The last red flicker from the sunken sun soon faded, and dense darkness fell. Not a sound or movement betrayed the existence of any human creature in that noxious gloom. Now and again the pattering feet of mice scurrying swiftly about the floor made a feeble yet mysterious clamour,—otherwise, all was intensely still. Outside, the heavens

were putting on all their majesty ; the planets swam into the purple ether, appearing to open and shine like water-lilies on a lake,—in the east a bar of silvery cloud showed where the moon would shortly rise, and through the window slit of the dungeon one small star could be just discerned, faintly glittering. But not even an argent ray flung slantwise from the moon when at last she ascended the skies could illumine the dense thicket of shadows that gathered in that dreary cell, or touch with a compassionate brightness the huddled form of the wretched captive within. Invisible and solitary, he wrestled with his own physical and mental misery, unconscious that the wall against which he leaned was warm and wet with tears,—the painful tears, worse than the shedding of blood, of a strong man's bitter agony.

II

HOURS passed, — and presently the heavy silence was broken by a distant uproar,—a hollow sound like the sudden inrush of a sea, which began afar off, and gathered strength as it came. Rolling onward and steadily increasing in volume, it appeared to split itself into a thousand angry echoes close by the dungeon walls, and a confused tumult of noisy tongues arose, mingling with the hurried and disorderly tramping of many feet and the clash of weapons. Voices argued hoarsely,—there were shrill whistlings,—and now and then the flare of tossing torches cast a fitful fire-gleam into the den where Barabbas lay. Once a loud laugh rang out above the more indistinct hubbub followed by a shout—

‘Prophecy! Prophecy! Who is he that smote thee?’

And the laughter became general, merging itself swiftly into a frantic chorus of yells and groans and hisses. Then came a brief pause, in which some of the wilder noises ceased, and an angry disputation seemed to be going on between two or three individuals in authority, till presently the ocean-like roar and swell of sound re-commenced, passed slowly on, and began to die away like gradually diminishing peals of thunder. But while it remained yet within distinct hearing, there was a slow dragging of chains inside the dungeon and a feeble beating of manacled hands at the interior grating, and the voice that had called before now called again :

‘Barabbas!’

No answer was returned.

‘Barabbas! Hearest thou the passing multitude?’

Still silence.

‘Barabbas! Dog! Assassin!’ and the speaker dealt an angry blow with his two fists at the dividing bars,—‘Art thou deaf to good news? I tell thee there is some strife in the city,—some new sedition,—it may be that our friends have conquered where we

have failed! Down with the law! Down with the tyrant and oppressor! Down with the Pharisees! Down with everything!' And he laughed, his laughter being little more than a hoarse whisper,— 'Barabbas! We shall be free! Free!—think of it, thou villain! A thousand curses on thee! Art thou dead or sleeping that thou wilt not answer me?'

But he exhausted his voice in vain, and vainly beat his fists against the grating. Barabbas was mute. The moonlight, grown stronger, pierced the gloom of his cell with a silvery radiance which blurred objects rather than illumined them, so that the outline of his figure could scarcely be discerned by his fellow-captive who strove to see him through the bars of the lower dungeon. Meanwhile the noise of the crowd in the streets outside had retreated into the distance, and only a faint murmur arose from time to time like the far-off surge of waves on a rocky shore.

'Barabbas! Barabbas!' and the vexed weak voice grew suddenly loud with an access of spite and fury — 'An' thou wilt not respond to good tidings thou

shalt listen to evil! Hear me!—hear thy friend Hanan who knows the wicked ways of women better than thou! Why didst thou kill the Pharisee, thou fool? 'Twas wasted pains,—for his boast was a true one and thy Judith is a'——

The opprobrious term he meant to use was never uttered, for with a sudden spring, fierce and swift as that of an enraged lion leaping from its lair, the hitherto inert Barabbas was upon him, clutching at the two hands he had thrust through the grating to support himself, and squeezing and bending them against the bars with a terrific ferocity that threatened to snap the wrists asunder.

‘Accursed Hanan! Dog! Breathe but her name again and I will saw thy robber hands off on this blunt iron and leave thee but the bleeding stumps wherewith to steal!’

Face to face in the faintly moonlit gloom, and all but invisible to one another, they writhed and wrestled a little space with strange impotence and equally strange fury, the chains on their fettered arms clashing against the bars between, till with a savage scream of pain, Hanan tore his maimed fingers

and lacerated wrists from the pitiless grasp that crushed them, and fell helplessly downward into the darkness of his own den, while Barabbas flung himself away and back on his bed of straw, breathing hard and heavily, and shuddering through every fibre of his frame.

‘If it were true,’ he whispered between his set teeth,—‘if it were true,—if she were false,—if the fair flesh and blood were but a mask for vileness,—God!—she would be worse than I,—a greater sinner than I have ever been!’

He buried his head in the hollow of his arm and lay quite still, striving to think out the problem of his own wild nature, his own blind and unbridled passions. It was a riddle too dark and difficult to solve easily, and gradually his mind wandered, and his thoughts began to lose themselves in a dizzy unconsciousness that was almost pleasure after so much pain. His clenched hands relaxed, his breathing became easier, and presently, heaving a deep sigh of exhaustion, he stretched himself out on the straw like a tired hound and slept.

The night marched on majestically. The moon

and her sister planets paced through their glorious circles of harmonious light and law ; and from all parts of the earth, prayers in every form and every creed went up to heaven for pity, pardon and blessing on sinful humanity that had neither pity, pardon nor blessing for itself,—till, with a magic suddenness the dense purple skies changed to a pearly grey,—the moon sank pallidly out of sight,—the stars were extinguished one by one like lamps when a feast is ended, and morning began to suggest its approach in the freshening air. But Barabbas still slept. In his sleep he had unconsciously turned his face upward to what glimmering light there was, and a placid smile smoothed the fierce ruggedness of his features. Slumbering thus, it was possible to imagine what this unkempt and savage-looking creature might have been in boyhood ; there was something of grace in his attitude despite his fettered limbs,—there were lines of tenderness about his mouth, the curve of which could be just seen through his rough beard ; and there was a certain grave beauty about the broad brow and closed eyelids. Awake, he fully appeared to be what he was, a rebellious and im-

penitent criminal,—but in that perfect tranquillity of deep repose, he might have passed for a brave man wronged.

With the first faint light of the dawn, a sudden unwonted stir and noise began in the outer courts of the prison. Barabbas, overpowered by slumber as he was, heard it in a semi-conscious way, without realising what it might mean. But presently, as it grew louder, he opened his eyes reluctantly and raising himself on one arm, listened. Soon, he caught, in the distance the sound of clashing weapons and the steady tramp of men, and while he yet wondered, vaguely and sleepily, at the unusual commotion, the clashing and jangling and marching drew nearer and nearer, till it came to an abrupt halt outside his very cell. The key turned in the lock,—the huge bolts were thrust back,—the door flew open, and such a blaze of light flared in that he put up his hands to shield his eyes as if from a blow. Blinking like a scared owl, he roused himself and struggled into a sitting posture, staring stupidly at what he saw,—a group of glittering soldiery headed by an officer who, holding a smoking torch aloft, peered into the drear black-

ness of the dungeon with a searching air of command.

‘Come forth, Barabbas!’

Barabbas gazed and gazed, dreamily and without apparent comprehension.

Just then a shrill voice yelled,

‘I, also! I, Hanan, am innocent! Bring me also before the Tribunal! Give me justice! Barabbas slew the Pharisee, not I! The mercy of the Feast for Hanan! Surely ye will not take Barabbas hence and leave me here?’

No heed was paid to these clamourings, and the officer merely repeated his command:

‘Come forth, Barabbas!’

Growing more broadly awake, Barabbas stumbled up on his feet and made an effort to obey, but his heavy chains prevented his advance. Perceiving this, the officer gave order to his men, and in a few minutes the impeding fetters were struck off, and the prisoner was immediately surrounded by the guard.

‘Barabbas! Barabbas!’ shrieked Hanan within.

Barabbas paused, looking vaguely at the soldiers

who pressed him in their midst. Then he turned his eyes upon their commander.

‘If I go to my death,’ he said faintly,—‘I pray thee give yonder man food. He hath starved and thirsted all day and night,—and he was once my friend.’

The officer surveyed him somewhat curiously.

‘Is that thy last request, Barabbas?’ he inquired. ‘It is Passover, and we will grant thee anything in reason!’

He laughed, and his men joined in the laughter. But Barabbas only stared straight ahead, his eyes looking like those of a hunted animal brought to bay.

‘Do thus much for charity,’ he muttered feebly; ‘I have also starved and thirsted, but Hanan is weaker than I.’

Again the officer glanced at him, but this time deigned no answer. Wheeling abruptly round, he uttered the word of command, placed himself at the head of his men, and the whole troop, with Barabbas in their centre closely guarded, strode onward and upward out of the dark dungeon precincts to the

higher floors of the building. And as they tramped through the stone passages, they extinguished the torches they carried, for the night was past and the morning had come.

III

MARCHING into the courtyard of the prison, the party halted there, while the heavy gates were being unfastened to allow an exit. Outside was the street,—the city,—freedom!—and Barabbas, still staring ahead, uttered a hoarse cry and put his manacled hands to his throat as though he were choking.

‘What ails thee?’ demanded one of the men nearest him, giving him a dig in the ribs with the hilt of his weapon,—‘Stand up, fool! Never tell me that a breath of air can knock thee down like a felled bullock!’

For Barabbas reeled, and would have fallen prone on the ground insensible, had not the soldiers caught at his swaying figure and dragged him up, roughly enough, and with much coarse swearing. But his

face had the pallor of death, and through his ragged beard his lips could be seen, livid and drawn apart over his clenched teeth like the lips of a corpse,—his breathing was scarcely perceptible.

The commander of the troop advanced and examined him.

‘The man is starved’—he said briefly,—‘Give him wine.’

This order was promptly obeyed, and wine was held to the mouth of the swooning captive, but his teeth were fast set and he remained unconscious. Drop by drop, however, the liquid was ungently forced down his throat, and after a couple of minutes, his chest heaved with the long laboured sighs of returning vitality, and his eyes flashed widely open.

‘Air,—air!’ he gasped, ‘The free air,—the light’——

He thrust out his chained hands gropingly, and then, with a sudden rush of strength induced by the warmth of the wine, he began to laugh wildly.

‘Freedom!’ he exclaimed, ‘Freedom! To live or die, what matter! Free! Free!’

‘Hold thy peace, thou dog!’ said the commanding officer sharply,—‘Who told thee thou wert free?’

Look at thy fettered wrists and be wise! Watch him closely, men! March!’

The prison-gates fell back on their groaning hinges and the measured tramp, tramp of the little troop awakened echoes of metallic music as they defiled across the stony street and passed down a steep flight of steps leading to a subterranean passage which directly communicated with the Tribunal of Justice, or Hall of Judgment. This passage was a long vaulted way, winding in and out through devious twists and turnings, and was faintly lit up by oil lamps placed in sconces at regular distances, the flickering luminance thus given only making the native darkness of the place more palpable. Gloom and imprisonment were as strongly suggested here as in the dungeons left behind,—and Barabbas, his heart sickening anew with vague dread, shrank and shivered, stumbling giddily once or twice as he strove to keep pace with the steady march of his escort. Hope died within him; the flashing idea of liberty that had stirred him to such a sudden rapture of anticipation, now fled like a dream. He was being taken to his death; of that he felt sure. What mercy

could he expect at the hands of the judge by whom he knew he must be tried and condemned? For was not Pontius Pilate governor of Judæa? and had not he Barabbas, slain, in a moment of unthinking fury, one of Pilate's friends? That accursed Pharisee! His sleek manner,—his self-righteous smile,—his white hand, with the glittering blazon of a priceless jewel on the forefinger, and all the trifling details of costume and deportment that went to make up the insolent and aggressive personality of the man,—these things Barabbas remembered with a thrill of loathing. He could almost see him as he saw him then, before with one fierce stab he had struck him to the earth, dead, and bleeding horribly in the brilliant moonlight, his wide open eyes glaring to the last in dumb and dreadful hate upon his murderer. And a life must always be given for a life; Barabbas admitted the stern justice of this law. It was only what he knew to be the ordained manner of death for such criminals as he, that caused his nerves to wince with fear and agony. If, like the Pharisee, he could be struck out of existence in a moment, why, that were naught,—but to be stretched on beams of

wood there to blister for long hours in the pitiless sun, —to feel every sinew strained to cracking, and every drop of blood turning first to fire and then to ice,—this was enough to make the strongest man shudder; and Barabbas, weakened by long fasting and want of air, trembled so violently at times that he could scarcely drag his limbs along. His head swam and his eyes smarted; there were dull noises in his ears caused partly by the surging blood in his brain, and partly by the echo of a sound which with every onward step grew more distinct,—a clamour of angry voices and shouting, in the midst of which he fancied he heard his own name,

‘Barabbas! Barabbas!’

Startled, he looked inquiringly into the faces of the soldiers that surrounded him, but their impassive bronze-like features betrayed no intelligence. Vainly he strove to listen more attentively,—the clanking weapons of his guard and the measured thud of their feet on the stone pavement, prevented him from catching the real purport of those distant outcries. Yet surely,—surely there was another shout—

‘Barabbas! Barabbas!’

A sickening horror suddenly seized him,—a swift and awful comprehension of his true position. The mob, relentless in all ages, were evidently clamouring for his death, and were even now preparing to make sport of his torments. Nothing more glorious to a brutal populace than the physical agony of a helpless fellow-creature,—nothing more laughter-moving than to watch the despair, the pain, and the writhing last struggle of a miserable human wretch condemned to perish by a needlessly slow and barbarous torture. Thinking of this, great drops of sweat bathed his brow, and as he staggered feebly on, he prayed dumbly for some sudden end,—prayed that his hot and throbbing blood might rush in merciful full force to a vital centre of his brain that so he might fall into oblivion swiftly like a stone falling into the sea. Anything—anything, rather than face the jeers and the mockery of a pitiless multitude trooping forth as to a feast to see him die!

Closer and closer came the hubbub and roar, interspersed with long pauses of comparative stillness, and it was during one of these pauses that his enforced journey came to an end. Turning sharply round the

last corner of the underground passage, the soldiers tramped out into the daylight, and ascended several wide marble steps, afterwards crossing an open circular court, empty and cool in the silver-grey hues of early dawn. Finally passing under a columnar arch, they entered a vast Hall, which was apparently divided into two square spaces,—one almost clear, save for a few prominent figures that stood forth in statuesque outlines against a background of dark purple hangings fringed with gold,—the other densely crowded with people who were only kept from rushing into the judicial precincts by a line of Roman soldiery headed by their centurion.

On the appearance of Barabbas with his armed escort, heads were turned round and hurried whispers were exchanged among the crowd, but not one look of actual interest or compassion was bestowed upon him. The people's mind was centred on a far weightier matter. Such a trial was pending as had never yet been heard within the walls of a human tribunal, and such a Captive was being questioned as never before gave answer to mortal man! With a sudden sense of relief, Barabbas, stupefied though he

was, began dimly to realise that perhaps after all his terrors had been groundless ; there was no sign here, at least, not at present, of his death being wanted to make an extra holiday for the mob, and, infected by the prevailing spirit of intense curiosity and attention, he craned his neck forward eagerly in order to obtain a view of what was going on. As he did so, the people directly in front of him shrank away in evident aversion, but he paid little heed to this mutely expressed repugnance, as their unanimous recoil made a convenient opening through which he could plainly see the judgment dais and all its imposing surroundings. There were seated several members of the Sanhedrim, several of whom he knew by sight, among them the high-priest Caiaphas, and his colleague Annas,—a few scribes occupied lower benches and were busily engaged in writing,—and among these dignified and exalted personages, he perceived, to his astonishment, a little lean, wrinkled, crouching money-changer, a man well known and cursed throughout all Jerusalem for his high rates of usury and cruelty to the poor. How came so mean a villain there? thought Barabbas wonderingly ; but he could not stop

to puzzle out the problem, for the chief person his eyes involuntarily sought for and rested upon was the Roman judge,—that very judge of whose stern sad face he had dreamed in the darkness of his dungeon, — Pilate the calm, severe, yet at times compassionate arbiter of life and death according to the codes of justice administered in Judæa. Surely to-day he suffered, or was weary!—for did ever legal ‘tyrant’ before look so sick at heart? In the grey morning light his features seemed to have an almost death-like rigidity and pallor—his hand played absently with the jewelled signet depending from his breast,—and beneath the falling folds of his robe of office, one sandalled foot beat impatiently upon the floor. Barabbas stared at him in dull fascination and fear,—he did not look a cruel so much as a melancholy man,—and yet there was something in his classic profile, and in the firm lines of his thin closely compressed lips that augured little softness of character. What was likely to be his verdict on an assassin who had slain one of his friends? And while Barabbas vaguely pondered this, an irrepressible cry rose up all at once from the multitude around

him, like the noise of breaking waters roaring in thunderous repetitions through the vaulted Hall,—

‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’

The wild shout was furious and startling, and with its thrilling clamour, the lethargic torpor that had held Barabbas more or less spell-bound was suddenly dispersed. With a swift shock he came to himself like one roughly shaken from sleep.

‘Crucify him!’

Crucify—whom? Whose life was thus passionately demanded? Not his? No, not his, most surely, for the people scarcely heeded him. Their looks were all turned another way. Then if he were not the offender, who was?

Pushing himself yet more to the front, he followed the angry glances of the mob and saw, standing patiently below the judgment-seat one Figure,—saw, and seeing, held his breath for very wonderment. For that Figure seemed to absorb into itself all the stateliness, all the whiteness, all the majesty of the lofty and spacious Tribunal, together with all the light that fell glimmeringly through the shining windows,—light that now began to form itself into

the promise rays of the rising sun. Such radiance, such power, such glorious union of perfect beauty and strength in one human Form, Barabbas had never seen or imagined before, and he gazed and gazed till his soul almost lost itself in the mere sense of sight. Like one in a trance he heard himself whisper,

‘Who is yonder Man?’

No one answered. It may be no one heard. And he repeated the query softly over and over again in his own mind, keeping his eyes fixed on that tall and god-like Being, whose sublime aspect seemed to imply an absolute mastery over men and things, but who nevertheless waited there silently in apparent submission to the law, with a slight dreamy smile on the beautiful curved lips, and a patient expression in the down-dropt eyelids, as of one who mutely expected the public declaration of what he had himself privately decreed. Still as a statue of sunlit marble He stood, erect and calm, His white garments flowing backward from His shoulders in even picturesque folds, thus displaying His bare rounded arms, crossed now on His breast in a restful attitude of resignation, yet in their very inertness suggesting such mighty muscular

force as would have befitted a Hercules. Power, grandeur, authority and invincible supremacy were all silently expressed in His marvellous and incomparable Presence,—and while Barabbas still stared, fascinated, awed, and troubled in mind, though he knew not why, the shouts of the populace broke forth again with hoarser reiteration and more impatient ferocity,—

‘Away with him! Away with him! Let him be crucified!’

And far back from the edge of the crowd, a woman’s voice, sweet and shrill and piercing, soared up and rang out with a cruel music over all the deeper uproar,—

‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’

IV

THE clear vibration of the woman's cry acted like a strange charm to stimulate afresh the already feverish excitement of the people. A frenzied hubbub ensued,—shrieks, yells, groans and hisses filled the air, till the noise became absolutely deafening, and Pilate, with an angry and imperious gesture suddenly rose and faced the mob. Advancing to the front of the dais, he lifted up his hand authoritatively to command silence. Gradually the din decreased, dying off in little growling thuds of sound down to a few inaudible mutterings, though before actual stillness was restored, the sweet soprano voice rang forth again melodiously, broken by a bubbling ripple of laughter,—

‘Crucify him!’

Barabbas started. That silvery laugh struck to his

heart coldly and made him shiver,—surely he had heard an echo of such scornful mirth before? It sounded bitterly familiar. Pilate's keen eyes flashed a vain search for the unseen speaker,—then, turning towards the people with an air of pacific dignity, he demanded,—

‘Why, what evil hath he done?’

This simple question was evidently ill-timed, and had a disastrous effect. The sole answer to it was a bellowing roar of derision,—a thunderous clamour of wild rage that seemed to shake the very walls of the Tribunal. Men, women, and little children alike joined in the chorus of ‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’ and the savage refrain was even caught up by the high-priests, elders and scribes, who in their various distinctive costumes and with their several attendants, were grouped behind Pilate on the judgment dais. Pilate heard them, and turned sharply round, a dark frown knitting his brows. Caiaphas, the chief priest, met his eyes with a bland smile, and repeated under his breath ‘Crucify him!’ as though it were a pleasing suggestion.

‘Of a truth it were well he should die the death,’

murmured Annas, his portly colleague, casting a furtive glance at Pilate from under his pale eyelashes ; —‘ The worthy governor seemeth to hesitate, yet verily this traitor is no friend of Cæsar’s.’

Pilate vouchsafed no answer save a look of supreme and utter scorn. Shrugging his shoulders, he re-seated himself and gazed long and earnestly at the Accused. ‘ What evil hath he done ? ’ It might have been more justly asked what evil could He do ? Was there any mark of vileness, any line of treachery on the open beauty of that fair and lustrous Countenance ? No ! Nobleness and truth were eloquently declared in every feature ; moreover there was something in the silent Presence of the Prisoner that made Pilate tremble,—something unspoken yet felt,—a vast and vague Mystery that seemed to surround and invest Him with a power all the more terrific because so deeply hidden. And while the troubled procurator studied His calm and dignified bearing, and wondered doubtfully what course it were best to pursue, Barabbas from his coign of vantage stared eagerly in the same direction, growing more and more conscious of an unusual and altogether wonderful

fascination in the aspect of this Man the people sought to slay. And presently his vivid curiosity gave him courage to address one of the soldiers near him.

‘Prithee tell me,’ said he, ‘what captive King stands yonder?’

The soldier gave a short contemptuous laugh.

‘King! Ay, ay! He calls himself King of the Jews,—a sorry jest, for which his life will pay forfeit. He is naught but a carpenter’s son, known as Jesus of Nazareth. He hath stirred up rebellion, and persuadeth the mob to disobey law. Moreover he consorteth with the lowest rascals,—thieves and publicans and sinners. He hath a certain skill in conjuring; the people say he can disappear suddenly when most sought for. But he made no attempt to disappear last night, for we trapped him easily, close by Gethsemane. One of his own followers betrayed him. Some there be who deem him mad,—some say he hath a devil. Devil or no, he is caught at last and must surely die.’

Barabbas heard in incredulous amazement. That royal-looking Personage a carpenter’s son?—a common

working-man, and one of the despised Nazarenes? No, no!—it was not possible! Then, by degrees he began to remember that before he, Barabbas, had been cast into prison for robbery and murder, there had been strange rumours afloat in the country of Judæa, concerning one Jesus, a miracle-worker, who went about healing the sick and the infirm, giving sight to the blind, and preaching a new religion to the poor. It was even asserted that He had on one occasion raised a man named Lazarus from the dead after three days' burial in the ground, but this astounding report was promptly suppressed and contradicted by certain scribes in Jerusalem who made themselves generally responsible for the current news. The country people were known to be ignorant and superstitious, and any one possessing what was called 'the gift of healing' in provinces where all manner of loathsome physical evils abounded, could obtain undue and almost supernatural influence over the miserable and down-trodden inhabitants. Yet surely if this Man were He of whom rumour had spoken, then there seemed no reason to doubt the truth of the miraculous powers attributed to Him. He was

Himself an embodied Miracle. And what were His powers actually? Much had been said concerning this same Jesus of Nazareth, of which Barabbas had no distinct recollection. His eighteen months of imprisonment had obliterated many things from his memory, and what he had chiefly brooded upon in his dreary dungeon had been his own utter misery, and the torturing recollection of one fair woman's face. Now, strange to say, he could find no room for any thought at all, save the impending fate of Him on whom his eyes were fixed. And as he looked, it seemed to him that all suddenly the judgment-hall expanded hugely and swam round in a circle of bright flame through which he saw that angelic white Figure shine forth with a thousand radiations of lightning-like glory! A faint cry of terror broke from his lips,—

‘No, no!’ he stammered—‘No, I tell you! You cannot, you dare not crucify Him! Yonder is a Spirit! . . . no man ever looked so . . . He is a god!’—

As he uttered the word, one of the Roman soldiers hearing, turned and struck him fiercely on the mouth with his steel gauntlet.

‘Fool, be silent! Wilt thou too be one of his disciples?’

Wincing with pain, Barabbas strove to wipe the trickling blood from his lips with his fettered hands, and as he did so, caught a straight full look from the so-called Jesus of Nazareth. The pity and the tenderness of that look pierced him to the soul; no living being had ever given him a glance so instantly comprehensive and sympathetic. With a quick reckless movement, he thrust himself more to the front of the crowd to gain a closer view of One who could so gently regard him. A passionate impulse of gratitude moved him to rush across the whole width of the Hall, and fling himself in all his rough brute strength in front of this new-found Friend to serve as a human buckler of defence in case of need. But bristling weapons guarded him, and he was too closely surrounded for escape. Just at that moment, one of the scribes, a tall lean man in sober-coloured raiment, rose from his place in the semi-circle of priests and elders grouped on the judicial platform, and, unfolding a parchment scroll began to read in a monotonous voice the various heads of the indictment against the

Accused. These had been hastily summed up by the Sanhedrim, during the brief trial which had taken place in the house of Caiaphas the high-priest on the previous evening. A great stillness now reigned in lieu of the previous uproar ; a deep hush of suspense and attention, in which the assembled mob seemed to wait and pant with expectation, as a crouching beast waits and pants for its anticipated prey. Pilate listened frowningly, one hand covering his eyes. During the occasional pauses in the scribe's reading, the noise of traffic in the outside stony streets made itself distinctly audible, and once the sound of a little child's voice singing, came floating merrily upwards like the echo of a joy-bell. The skies were changing rapidly from pearl-grey hues to rose and daffodil ; the sun was high above the horizon, but its light had not yet found a way through the lofty windows of the judgment-hall. It beamed on the crowd beyond the barrier with iridescent flashes of colour,—now flashing on a red kerchief tying up a woman's hair, or on the glittering steel corselet of a Roman soldier, while the Tribunal itself was left in cold and unillumined whiteness, relieved only by the velvet hangings

pertaining to it, which in their sombre purple tint suggested the falling folds of a funeral pall.

The reading of the indictment finished, Pilate still remained silent for some minutes. Then, lifting his hand from his eyes, he surveyed, somewhat satirically, his companions in authority.

‘Ye have brought me this man as one that perverteth the people,’ he said slowly,—‘What accusation bring ye against him?’

Caiaphas, and Annas, who was then vice-president of the Sanhedrim, exchanged wondering and half indignant glances. Finally Caiaphas with an expression of offended dignity looked round appealingly upon his compeers.

‘Surely ye have all heard the indictment,’ he said, —‘And the worthy governor’s question seemeth but vain in this matter. What need we of further witnesses? If yonder man were not a malefactor would we have brought him hither? He hath blasphemed; for last night we did solemnly adjure him in the name of the living God, to declare unto us whether he were the Christ, the Son of the Blessed, and he answered boldly and said “*I am! And*

hereafter ye shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of Power and coming in the clouds of heaven !” What think ye? Is he not worthy of death?’

An emphatic murmur of assent went round the semi-circle of the priests and elders. But Pilate gave a gesture of contempt and flung himself restlessly back on the judgment-seat.

‘Ye talk in parables, and do perplex the ends of justice. If he himself saith he is the Son of Man, how do ye make him out to be the Son of God?’

Caiaphas flushed an angry red, and was about to make some retort, but on a moment’s reflection, suppressed his feelings and proceeded, smiling cynically—

‘Of a truth thou art in merciful mood, Pilate, and thine Emperor will not blame thee for too much severity of rule! In our law, the sinner that blasphemeth shall surely die. Yet if blasphemy be not a crime in thy judgment, what of treason? Witnesses there are who swear that this man hath said it is not lawful to give tribute unto Cæsar; moreover he is an evil boaster, for he hath arrogantly declared that he

will destroy the Holy Temple. Yea verily, even unto the Holy of Holies itself, he saith he will destroy, so that not one stone shall remain upon another ; and in three days, without the help of hands, he will build up a new and greater tabernacle ! Such mad ranting doth excite the minds of the populace to rebellion,—moreover he deceiveth the eyes of the vulgar and uninstructed by feigning to perform great miracles when all is but trickery and dissimulation. Finally, he hath entered Jerusalem in state as a King ;’—here he turned to his colleague in office—‘Thou, Annas, canst speak of this, for thou wert present when the multitude passed by.’

Annas, thus appealed to, moved a little forward, pressing his hands together, and casting down his pale-coloured treacherous eyes with a deferential air of apologetic honesty.

‘Truly it would seem that a pestilence in this man’s shape doth walk abroad to desolate and disaffect the province,’ said he,—‘For I myself beheld the people, when this traitor entered the city by the road of Bethphage and Bethany, rush forth to meet him with acclamations, strewing palm-branches, olive-boughs,

and even their very garments in his path, as though he were a universal conqueror of men. And shouts of triumph rent the air, for the multitude received him both as prophet and king, crying "*Hosanna ! Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord ! Hosanna in the highest !*" Whereat I marvelled greatly, and being troubled in mind, returned unto Caiaphas to tell him straightway those things which I had seen and heard concerning the strange frenzy of the mob, which of a surety is dangerous to the maintenance of law and order. 'Tis an unseemly passion of the vulgar to thus salute with royal honour one of the accursed Nazarenes.'

'Is he in truth a Nazarene?' inquired one of the elders suddenly, with a dubious air,—'I have heard it said that he was born in Bethlehem of Judæa, and that Herod, the late king, was told of certain marvels at his birth'——

'An idle rumour,' interrupted Annas hastily; 'We took him before the tetrarch yesternight, where, had he chosen, he could have made his own defence. For Herod asked him many questions which he could not or would not answer, till the noble tetrarch's

patience failing, he sent him on to Pilate to be sentenced. He is known to be of Nazareth ; for his parents have their home and calling in the village so named.'

Pilate listened, but said nothing. He was ill at ease. The statements of Caiaphas and Annas seemed to him a mere babble of words without meaning. He was entirely opposed to the members of the Sanhedrim ;—he knew they were men who chiefly sought their own interest and advancement, and he also knew that the real cause of their having denounced the so-called 'prophet of Nazareth,' was fear,—fear of having their theories shaken, their laws questioned, and their authority over the people denied. He saw in the dignified Prisoner before him, one who, whatever He was, or wherever He came from, evidently thought for Himself. Nothing more terrorising to sacerdotal tyranny than liberty of thought !—nothing more dangerous than freedom of conscience, and indifference to opinion ! Pilate himself was afraid, but not with the same dread as that which affected the Jewish priests,—his misgivings were vague and undefined, and all the more difficult

to overcome. He was strangely reluctant to even look at the 'Nazarene,' whose tall and radiant form appeared to shine with an inward and supernatural light amid the cold austerity of the judicial surroundings; and he kept his eyes down, fixed on the floor, the while he hesitatingly pondered his position. But time pressed,—the Sanhedrim council were becoming impatient,—he was at last compelled to act and to speak,—and slowly turning round in his chair he fully confronted the Accused, who at the same instant lifted His noble head and met the anxious, scrutinising regard of His judge with an open look of fearless patience and infinite tenderness. Meeting that look, Pilate trembled,—but anon, forcing himself to assume an air of frigid composure, he spoke aloud in grave authoritative accents :

'Answerest thou nothing? Hearest thou not how many things are witnessed against thee?'

Then and only then, the hitherto immovable white-robed Figure stirred,—and advancing with slow and regal grace, approached Pilate more nearly, still looking at him. One bright ray of the risen sun fell slantingly through a side-window and glistened star-

like on the bronze-gold of the rich hair that clustered in thick waves upon His brow, and as He kept His shining eyes upon His judge, He smiled serenely even as one who pardons a sin before hearing its confession. But no word passed His lips. Pilate recoiled,—an icy cold chilled the blood in his veins,—involuntarily he rose, and fell back step by step, grasping at the carved gold projections of his judicial throne to steady his faltering limbs, for there was something in the quiet onward gliding of that snowy-garmented Shape that filled his soul with dread, and suggested to his mind old myths and legends of the past, when Deity appearing suddenly to men, had consumed them in a breath with the lightning of great glory. And that one terrific moment while he stood thus face to face with the Divine Accused seemed to him an eternity. It was a never-to-be-forgotten space of time in which all his life, past and present, appeared reflected as a landscape is reflected in a drop of dew,—moreover, the premonition of a future, dark and desolate, loomed indistinctly upon his mind, like a shadow on the horizon. All unconsciously to himself his countenance paled to a ghastly haggardness,

and scarcely knowing what he did, he raised his hands appealingly as though to avert some great and crushing blow. The learned Jews who were grouped around him, stared at his terror-stricken attitude in wonderment, and exchanged glances of vexation and dismay, while one of the elders, a dark-eyed, crafty-visaged man, leaned forward hastily and touched him on the shoulder, saying in a low tone—

‘What ails thee, Pilate? Surely thou art smitten with palsy, or some delusion numbs thy senses! Hasten, we beseech thee, to pronounce sentence, for the hours wear on apace,—and at this season of the Passover, ’twere well and seemly that thou should’st give the multitude their will. What is this malefactor unto thee? Let him be crucified, for he is guilty of treason, since he calls himself a King. Full well thou knowest we have no King but Cæsar, yet yonder fellow boldly saith he is King of the Jews. Question him, whether or no he hath not thus boasted falsely of power!’

Pilate gazed round at his adviser bewilderedly,—he felt as though he were entangled in the mazes of an evil dream where demons whispered dark hints of

unworded crimes. Sick and cold to the very heart, he yet realised that he must make an effort to interrogate the Prisoner as he was bidden, and, moistening his parched lips, he at last succeeded in enunciating the necessary query, albeit his accents were so faint and husky as to be scarcely audible.

'Art thou the King of the Jews?'

An intense silence followed. Then a full, penetrating Voice, sweeter than sweetest music, stirred the air,—

'Sayest thou this thing of thyself or did others tell it thee of me?'

Pilate's face flushed, and his hand grasped the back of his chair convulsively. He gave a gesture of impatience, and answered abruptly, yet tremulously,—

'Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me; what hast thou done?'

A light as of some inward fire irradiated the deep lustrous eyes of the 'Nazarene;' a dreamy, meditative smile parted His lips. Looking so, and smiling thus,

His glorious aspect made the silence eloquent, and Pilate's authoritative demand 'What hast thou done?' seemed answered without speech. And the voiceless response might have been rendered into words like these,—

'What have I done? I have made Life sweet, and robbed Death of bitterness; there is honour for men and tenderness for women; there is hope for all, Heaven for all, God for all!—and the lesson of Love,—Love divine and human as personified in Me, sanctifies the Earth for ever through My Name!'

But these great facts remained unuttered, for as yet they were beyond dull mortal comprehension, and, with the faint dreamy smile still giving a poetic languor of deep thought to every line of His countenance, the Accused answered slowly, every word He spoke vibrating melodiously through the stillness,—

'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered to the Jews. But—now is my kingdom not from hence!'

And, drawing His majestic figure up to its full height, He raised His head and looked up towards the loftiest window of the Hall, now glittering diamond-like in the saffron-tinted rays of the swiftly ascending sun. His attitude was so unspeakably grand and suggestive of power, that Pilate again recoiled, with that sickening sense of helpless terror clutching at his heart anew. He stole a furtive and anxious glance at the chief priests and elders, who were leaning forward on their benches listening attentively,—they all appeared unmoved and coldly indifferent. Caiaphas smiled satirically and exchanged a side-whisper with Annas, but otherwise no one volunteered to speak. Sorely against his will, Pilate continued his examination. Feigning an unconcern he was far from feeling, he asked his next question half carelessly, half kindly,—

'Art thou a King, then?'

With a sublime gesture, the Accused flashed one burning glance upon all who waited breathlessly for His reply,—then looked straightly and steadily, full into Pilate's eyes.

'Thou sayest!'

And, as He uttered the words, the sun, climbing to the topmost arch of the opposite window, beamed through it in a round blaze of glory, and flooded the judgment-hall with ripples of gold and crimson, circling the Divine brows with a glittering rainbow radiance as though the very heavens had set their crown and signet upon the splendour of a Truth revealed!

V

THERE was a moment's pause.

Pilate sat dumb and irresolute,—but among the assembled members of the Sanhedrim there ran various broken murmurs of indignation and impatience. ‘*What need we of further witness?*’ ‘He is convicted out of his own mouth!’ ‘He hath spoken treason!’ ‘*Let him die the death!*’ The sunlight showering its prolific gold on the white garments of the Prisoner, flashed into prismatic glimmerings now and again as though it had encountered some other light with which it joyously played and harmonised. And Pilate’s sight grew misty and strained,—his temples throbbed and ached. He was tired, confused, pained and perplexed; the extraordinary beauty of the Figure confronting him was too singularly unique to be otherwise than

powerfully impressive, and he knew as thoroughly as ever mortal judge knew anything, that to condemn this Man to a hideous and unmerited death would be to commit a crime the consequences of which he could not quite foresee, but which he instinctively dreaded. He was perfectly aware of the active part the high-priests Caiaphas and Annas had played in the work of hunting down the 'Nazarene' and bringing Him before the Tribunal, and he also realised the manner in which they had laid their plans. A certain wild and lawless young man named Iscariot, the only son of his father, had banded himself with the disciples of this Jesus of Nazareth, and the elder Iscariot, a wealthy usurer, was a close friend and confidant of Caiaphas. It was therefore not difficult to perceive how the father, prompted by the high-priest, and himself displeased at his son's sudden fanaticism for a stranger, had brought all the weight of religious and parental authority to bear in persuading the young man to give up his so-called 'Master' to justice. There were other far more deeply hidden motives than these of which Pilate was ignorant, but what little he knew, or thought

he knew, was sufficient to make him distrust the unsupported witness of the priests and elders alone. Pondering the matter within himself a while, he presently turned to the council and demanded,

‘Where is Iscariot?’

Anxious looks were exchanged, but no reply was offered.

‘Ye tell me it was he who brought the guard to where this Nazarene lay hidden,’ proceeded Pilate slowly,—‘An’ he hath taken so chief a part in the capture, he should be here. I would fain know what he hath to say concerning the doings of the man whom first he chose to follow and then forsake. Let him be brought before me.’

Annas leaned forward with an air of apologetic servility.

‘The young man hath fled from the city out of fear,’ said he; ‘He hath been seized with some fool’s panic, for lo, he came to us at late midnight, madly bemoaning his sins and bringing back the silver which we had given him as guerdon for his service and obedience to the law. Some evil fever surely worked within his blood, for while we yet gently

reasoned with him in hope to calm his frenzy, all suddenly he dashed the money down before us in the Temple and departed in haste, we know not whither.'

'Strange!' muttered Pilate abstractedly. The absence of Iscariot from the present scene of trial vexed him sorely. He had a strong desire to ask the man who had betrayed his Master the cause of his sudden disaffection, and now that this was impossible, he felt more jaded and worn-out than before. His head swam,—and in the confused trouble of his mind, a great darkness seemed to grow up out of the air and envelop him swiftly and resistlessly. And in that darkness he fancied he saw a ring of fire which swung round and round like a rolling wheel, becoming narrower with every rotation, and binding him in closely as with a burning zone. The horrible sensation increased, stifling his breath and blinding his eyes till he felt he must leap from his chair and cry aloud in order to save himself from suffocation,—when,—all at once, his nameless inward suffering ceased,—a cool breath seemed to be wafted across his brow, and looking up, he saw that the deep and

loving gaze of the Accused was fastened upon him with an infinity of tenderness and pity that opened to him, as it were, a new and exquisite and wondrous sense of life and limitless desire. For that one moment all his perplexities were swept away, and his course seemed clear. Turning to the chief priests and elders he said in firm emphatic tones,—

'I find no fault in this man!'

His words were received with a general movement of indignation, and Caiaphas losing all his wonted dignity, rose up in wrath, exclaiming loudly,

'No fault! No fault? Art thou mad, Pilate? He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Galilee to this place'—

'And look you,' interposed Annas, craning his thin neck and ill-favoured visage forward,—*'He consorteth with none but outcasts, publicans and sinners, and against all the virtuous he pronounceth openly the damnation of hell. Here sitteth the Rabbi Micha who hath heard him make outcry in the public streets, and hath taken note of certain sayings wherewith he seeketh to mislead the people.*

For he is one that perverteth truth while feigning most boldly to proclaim it. Speak, Micha,—for it seemeth that the worthy governor needeth more witness than ours against this rogue and blasphemer.'

Micha, an elderly Jew, with a keen, dark, withered face and hard cold eyes, rose at once and drew a set of tablets from his breast.

'These words,' said he in a dry even tone, 'are veritably set down here as I received them with mine own ears while standing in the Temple itself. For this misguided and fanatical young man hesitated not to preach his unscrupulous theories in the established place of holy doctrine. Judge ye for yourselves whether such language be not violent,'—and bringing his memoranda close to his eyes, he read slowly,

'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, and ye neither go in yourselves, nor suffer them that are entering to go in.'

'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ! for ye devour widows' houses, for pretence making

long prayer, therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.

'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves!'

'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

'Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell!'

Here pausing, Micha looked up.

'Of a truth,' he remarked in the same monotone,—
'for one whom the country folk strive to screen by the spreading of false rumours concerning his gentle and harmless character, such words as these are mere raving devilry, and full of bitterness, spite and malice prepense, set forth as wilful onslaughts upon those who do maintain virtue, law and order. Little gentleness will ye find in them, but much misguided vanity and spleen.'

A slight dawning smile lifted the rigid corners of

Pilate's stern mouth. In his heart he secretly admired the magnificent physical and moral courage of a man who could boldly enter the Temple itself and thus plainly and publicly denounce hypocrisy in the very place where it was most practised.

'I tell thee, good Micha, and thou, Caiaphas, and Annas also,' he said decisively, 'I find no fault in him at all, touching those things whereof ye accuse him. No, nor yet Herod,—for ye went to him last night, and lo, nothing worthy of death is found in him'——

'Stay, noble Pilate!—listen to *me!*' interrupted a querulous, cracked voice, and the little ape-like figure of the old usurer whom Barabbas had, to his surprise, perceived occupying a prominent place on one of the judgment-benches, rose up in tremulous excitement—'Listen I pray thee!—for art not thou set here to administer justice to the wronged and oppressed in Judæa? Look you, most excellent sir! this malefactor, this accursed devil, this vile traitor and deceiver'—here the wrinkled old wretch gasped and sputtered for breath in the sheer extremity of rage,—'this pretended prophet came insolently into the Temple two days ago and saw me there at my

accustomed place,—thou knowest, noble Pilate, I am an honest poor man!—and lo, like a furious madman he seized me,—ay, and he hath a clutch like iron!—and taking up a whip of knotted cords scourged me, great Pilate!—scourged me, *me!*’ and his voice rose to a shrill yell of fury—‘out of the holy place! And his mouth was full of blasphemy and cursing, for he said, “*My house is called the house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves!*” Mark that, worthy Pilate! he did claim the very Temple as his own, even as he hath claimed to be King of the Jews, and hath sought to reign over all Judæa. Crucify him, noble governor!—crucify him in the name of God! And scourge him!—scourge him till the proud and sinful blood flows in torrents from his veins!—scourge him, for he hath scourged one of the children of Levi,—yea, he hath scourged me, even *me!*’ Here he stopped, half choked with malice and fury, while Pilate regarded him, coldly smiling.

‘Verily, Zacharias, thou tellest me of one good service this man hath rendered the state,’ he said deliberately—‘Long hast thou merited a whipping, and that thou hast at last received it will help to

satisfy some few of thy money clients in Jerusalem !' An involuntary murmur of approving laughter broke from some of the members of the council, but was quickly suppressed as the high-priest frowned darkly upon the offenders. Zacharias shrank back, scowling and muttering, while Pilate calmly continued—' More than ever am I persuaded that there is no evil in this youthful preacher to the poor, and no fault at all worthy of death, wherefore as ye have a custom at this Feast requiring the liberation of a prisoner, I will release him unto you and let him go.'

' The multitude will rend thee, Pilate, for an act so impolitic !' exclaimed Caiaphas hotly—' What !—shall an innocent man like this aged Zacharias, who hath no fault save the common fault of his trade, be publicly scourged, and thou the governor of Judæa find no remedy? Thou art no friend to Cæsar if thou let this man go. Moreover they demand the release of Barabbas, who hath been imprisoned for more than a year, and whose sin of rebellion was one of impulse, not of malignant intention. He hath been brought hither by my order, and waits below the barrier, guarded, but prepared for freedom.'

‘Then he is ill prepared!’ declared Pilate sharply—
‘For by all the gods of Rome he shall be crucified! Freedom for Barabbas? Have ye no memory? Did he not raise an insurrection against Roman law, and harangue the people in the open streets far more wildly and arrogantly than this harmless Nazarene hath done? And did he not slay all unprovokedly one of your own tribe, Gabrias the Pharisee, a man of excellent learning and renown? Go to! Envy doth prompt ye to demand the nobler life and give liberty to the vile,—and ye have sorely misguided the mob in this matter. But now will I myself address them, and release unto them him whom they call King of the Jews.’

And, rising from his chair he prepared to descend from the Tribunal. Caiaphas made a hasty step forward as though to prevent his movements, but Pilate waved him aside disdainfully, and he stood rooted to the spot, the picture of baffled rage and dismay, his thin white hands nervously clenched, and the great jewel on his breast heaving up and down with the passionate quickness of his breathing. Annas sat still in his place, utterly taken

aback by the governor's decision, and stared fixedly in front of him as though he found it difficult to believe the evidence of his senses. Zacharias the money-lender alone gave violent vent to his feelings by throwing up his hands wildly in the air and anon beating his breast, the while he loudly bewailed himself—

‘Aï! aï! There is no justice left in Jerusalem! Woe, woe unto the children of Abraham who are ground down beneath the iron heel of Rome! Woe unto us who are made the spoil of the heathen tyrant and oppressor!’

And as he thus raved and rocked his lean body to and fro, the Divine Prisoner suddenly turned and regarded him steadily. A rapid change came over his wicked features,—he ceased yelling,—and drawing himself together in a wrinkled heap till he looked like some distorted demon, he began to mutter curses in a thick whisper that was more awful than any audible speech. The ‘Nazarene’ watched him for a moment, a noble wrath clouding the fairness of His brows,—but the shadow of righteous indignation passed even more swiftly than it had come, leaving His face serene

and smiling and patient as before. Only the bright pure Eyes were more steadily uplifted to the sunlight, as though they sought to drink in glory for sustenance. Meanwhile, an old, white-bearded man, a prominent and much-respected member of the Sanhedrim, interposed, and pulling the mouthing Zacharias back to his place with a stern injunction to be silent, he himself ventured to address Pilate in calm conciliatory accents.

‘Believe me, worthy Pilate, thou art not altogether wise in this matter. Why, for the sake of one man wilt thou give cause of offence to both the priests and people? A rebellious rogue and murderer such as Barabbas hath proved himself to be, is far less dangerous to the community than yonder young Teacher of new doctrines, who out of very arrogance, arising perchance from the consciousness of a certain superior physical force and outward beauty, doth maintain himself thus boldly, striving to terrorise thee and avert true justice. Lo, there are many such as he among the wandering Egyptian aliens, who, by reason of an imposing presence, and a certain vague sublimity of speech, do persuade the less crafty to believe in

their supernatural powers. Look you, even Barabbas himself hath assumed this same imperial attitude when haranguing the mob and inciting the idle and disaffected to rioting and disorder, for he hath been a student of many books and speaketh with the tongue of eloquence. Nevertheless none of the rebellious have presumed so far as this misguided Nazarene, who, forsaking his trade, and collecting about him the veritable scum of Judæa (with the exception of Iscariot, who is well connected, and whose fanaticism for this man hath sorely grieved his father) doth pretend to open Heaven only to the poor and vile. He hath declared it easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God! Wherefore, by such exaggerated parable he doth imply that even imperial Cæsar shall not escape damnation. Should such teachings prevail there will be an end of all restraint in Judæa, and thine Emperor will most surely blame thee for thy lack of discipline. Take heed, good Pilate!—mercy is nobly becoming in thee, but with mercy, forget not judgment!’

Pilate listened to this little homily with manifest

reluctance and impatience, and his level brows drew together in a worried frown. After a pause he said irritably,

'Take ye him then and judge him according to your law !'

Caiaphas turned upon him indignantly.

'It is not lawful for us to put any man to death,' he answered haughtily — *'Thou art the governor, and to thee we are compelled to look for justice.'*

At that moment there was a slight stir and movement in the waiting crowd beyond the barrier, and people were seen to be making way for the entrance of a new-comer. This was a slim, dark-eyed youth of a graceful form and delicate beauty,—he was gorgeously attired in a silken garment of pale blue, bound about him with a scarlet girdle and richly embroidered in gold and silver. He advanced in haste, yet timidly, and as he crossed the judgment-hall, cast an anxious and awe-stricken look at the stately figure of the 'Nazarene.' Pilate watched his approach with a good deal of surprise and impatience,—he recognised his wife's favourite page, and

wondered what had brought him thither at such a time and in so unaccustomed a place. Arriving at the judgment dais the youth dropped on one knee and proffered a folded scroll. Snatching it in haste, Pilate opened it and uttered a smothered exclamation. It was from his wife, one of the most beautiful of Roman women, known in the city for her haughty and fearless disposition, and for her openly pronounced contempt for the manners and customs of the Jews. And what she had written now ran simply thus,—

‘Have thou nothing to do with that just man, for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.’

With an abrupt sign of dismissal to the page, who at once retired by the way he had come, Pilate crushed the missive in his hand and sat lost in thought. Round the Tribunal, the sunshine spread in a sea of gold,—a bell striking the hour, slowly chimed on the deep stillness,—the white-robed figure of the Accused stood waiting as immovably as a sculptured god in the midst of the dazzling beams of the morning,—and through Pilate’s brain the

warning words of the woman he loved more than all the world, sent jarring hammer-strokes of repetition—

‘Have thou nothing to do with that just man!’

Poor Pilate!

VI

IF he could have prolonged his deliberations thus for ever it would have seemed to him well. He was not actually conscious of time. Something vast, indefinite and eternal appeared to surround and make of him but a poor, helpless, stupid block of perishable humanity, unfit to judge, unfit to rule. He felt as though he had aged suddenly,—as though a score of years had passed in withering haste over his head since the ‘Nazarene’ had confronted him as a prisoner waiting to be condemned. And with this mysterious sense of inward age and incapacity freezing his very blood, he had the goading consciousness that all the members of the Sanhedrim council were watching him, wondering at his indecision and impatiently expecting judgment on what to them was a matter of perfectly plain common-sense and social justice, but which to

him had assumed almost gigantic proportions of complexity and trouble. At last, with an effort, he arose, and gathering his robes about him, again prepared to descend from the Tribunal. With a half-appealing, half-authoritative gesture he beckoned the Accused to follow him. He was instantly obeyed, and the Man of Nazareth walked patiently yet proudly after His judge, whose trailing garment served to sweep the ground for the passing of His footsteps. In the rear of the twain came all the priests and elders, whispering together and shaking their heads over the Roman governor's incomprehensible conduct, and after them in turn the crooked-limbed and evil-visaged usurer, Zacharias, shuffled along, supporting himself on a stick of which the knob was heavily encrusted with gold and jewels, this one piece of gorgeousness being in curious contrast to the rest of his otherwise beggarly attire. And as the whole vari-coloured group moved forward, a murmur of satisfaction and interest hummed through the expectant multitude,—at last the long-deferred sentence was to be finally pronounced.

Arrived within a few feet of the barrier which

divided the judicial precincts from the common Hall, Pilate paused. Lifting up his voice so that it might be heard on the very outskirts of the throng, he addressed himself to the people, at the same time pointing to the regal Figure standing a little way behind him.

‘Behold your King!’

Yells of derisive laughter answered him, intermingled with hooting and hisses. Caiaphas smiled disdainfully, and Annas appeared to be convulsed with a paroxysm of silent mirth. Pilate’s glance swept over them both with a supreme and measureless scorn. He loathed the Jewish priests, their ritual and their doctrine, and made no secret of his abhorrence. Holding up one hand to enjoin silence he again appealed to the irritated and impatient mob.

‘I have examined this man before you,’ he said, in deliberate far-reaching accents, *‘and I find in him no fault worthy of death.’*

Here he paused, and a sudden hush of stupefaction and surprise fell on the listening crowd. The governor resumed,—

‘But ye have a custom that I should release unto you

one at the Passover; will ye therefore that I release unto you the "King of the Jews"?'

A roar of furious denial interrupted and drowned his voice.

'Not this man!'

'Not this man, but Barabbas!'

'Barabbas!' *'Barabbas!'*

The name was caught and taken up by the people as though it were a shout of triumph, and echoed from mouth to mouth till it died away of itself in the outer air. Pilate stepped back, disappointed and irate,—he realised the position. The populace had evidently been intimidated by the priests, and had come prepared to stand by their monstrous demand,—the life of a notorious criminal in place of that of an innocent man. And they had a certain right to enforce their wishes at the season of Passover. With a short vexed sigh, Pilate flashed a searching glance over the now closely serried ranks of the people.

'Where is Barabbas?' he demanded impatiently—
'Bring him forth!'

There was a moment's delay, and then Barabbas, wild-eyed, uncouth, half starved and almost naked,

yet not without a certain defiant beauty in his fierce aspect, was thrust to the front between two armed soldiers of the Roman guard. Pilate eyed him with strong disfavour,—Barabbas returned him scornful glance for glance. Conscious that the attention of the mob was now centred upon him, the whole soul of the long-imprisoned and suffering man rose up in revolt against the ‘Roman tyrant’ as Pilate was not unfrequently called by the disaffected Jews, and the old pride, rebellion and lawlessness of his disposition, began to make new riot in his blood. If it had not been for the wondrous, almost luminous Figure that maintained such an attitude of regal calm close at hand, Barabbas felt that he would have willingly struck his judge on the mouth with the very gyves that bound his wrists together. As it was, he remained motionless, his eyes blazing forth anger,—his bare brown chest heaving quickly with the irregular fluctuations of his passionate breath,—and in that attitude he might have stood as a representative type of strong, barbaric, untaught, untamed Humanity. Facing him was the sublime contrast, Divinity,—the grand Ideal,—the living

symbol of perfect and spiritualised Manhood, whose nature was the nearest akin to God, and who for this very God-likeness was deemed only worthy of a criminal's death. Some glimmering idea of the monstrous incongruity between himself and the silent Accused, struck Barabbas forcibly even while he confronted Pilate with all that strange effrontery which is sometimes born of conscious guilt; and the thought crossed his brain that if, in agreement to the public voice he were indeed released, the first use he would make of his liberty would be to persuade the people to mercy on behalf of this kingly-looking Man, whose noble aspect exerted on his dark and tortured soul, a secret, yet potent spell. And while this idea was in his mind, Pilate, steadily regarding him, spoke out with harsh brevity—

‘So! Thou didst slay Gabrias the Pharisee?’

Barabbas smiled disdainfully.

‘Yea! And so would I slay another such an one could there be found in all the city so great a liar!’

Pilate turned to the high-priests and elders.

‘Hear ye him? Yet this is the man ye would set at liberty? Impenitent and obstinate, he hath no

sense of sorrow for his crime,—how then doth he merit pardon?’

Caiaphas, vaguely embarrassed by the question, lowered his eyes for a second, then raised them, conveying into his long thin face an admirably affected expression of serious pity and forbearance.

‘Good Pilate,’ he replied blandly and in a low tone, —‘Thou knowest not the whole truth of this affair. Barabbas hath indeed been guilty of much sin, but look you, his evil passions were not roused without a cause. We, of the Holy Temple, are prepared to instruct him how best his crime may be expiated in the sight of the Most High Jehovah, and his offering shall not be rejected, but received at the altar. For the ill-fated Gabrias, though eminent in learning and of good renown, had a hasty and false tongue, and it is commonly reported that he did most vilely slander a virtuous maiden of this city whom Barabbas loved.’

Pilate lifted his eyebrows superciliously.

‘These are but base pandering matters,’ he said, ‘wherewith thou, Caiaphas, should’st have nought to do. And Gabrias surely was not the only possessor of a false tongue! Thy words savour of a woman’s

tale-bearing and are of idle purport. Murder is murder,—theft is theft,—excuses cannot alter crimes. And this Barabbas is likewise a robber.'

And again confronting the multitude, he reiterated his previous demand in a more directly concise form :

' Which will ye that I release unto you ? Barabbas or Jesus which is called Christ ? '

With one accord the populace responded tumultuously,

' Barabbas ! ' ' Barabbas ! '

Pilate gave a gesture which might have meant despair or indignation or both, and turned a wistful look over his shoulder at the 'Nazarene,' who at the moment seemed absorbed in grave and tranquil meditation, of which the tenor must have been pleasing, for He smiled.

Once more Pilate addressed the crowd :

' What will ye then that I do unto Him whom ye call the King of the Jews ? '

' Crucify him ! ' ' Crucify him ! '

The answer came in yells and shrieks of rage, but above all the frantic din, there rose that one silver

flute-like woman's voice that had been heard before—

‘*Crucify him !*’

Barabbas started at the sound as a racehorse starts at the prick of a spur. Wildly he looked about him,—with an almost ravenous glitter in his eyes he scanned the shouting throng, but could discover no glimpse of the face he longed yet feared to see. And, yielding to a nameless attraction, he brought his wandering glances back,—back to the spot where the sunlight seemed to gather in a fiery halo round the form of Him who as Pilate had said was ‘called Christ.’ What was the meaning of the yearning love and vast pity that was suddenly reflected in that fair Countenance? What delicate unspoken word hovered on the sensitive lips, arched like a bow and tremulous with feeling? Barabbas knew not,—but it suddenly seemed to him that his whole life with all its secrets good and evil, lay bare to the gaze of those soft yet penetrating eyes that met his own with such solemn warning and tender pathos.

‘No, no!’ he cried loudly on a swift inexplicable impulse—‘*She* did not speak! She could not thus

have spoken! Women are pitiful, not cruel, — *she* seeks no man's torture! O people of Jerusalem!' he continued, his deep voice gathering a certain sonorous music of its own, as, turning himself about, he faced the crowd—'Why do ye clamour for this prophet's death? Surely he hath not slain a man among ye, —neither hath he stolen your goods nor broken into your dwellings. Rumour saith he hath healed ye in your sicknesses, comforted ye in your sorrows, and performed among ye many wondrous miracles, so ye yourselves report, — wherefore then for these things should he die? Are ye not just? — have ye not the gift of reason? Lo, it is I who merit punishment! I, who slew Gabrias and rejoice in mine iniquity! — and look you, I, blood-stained, guilty and impenitent, deserve my death, whereas this man is innocent!'

Shouts of derisive laughter and applause and renewed cries of 'Barabbas! Barabbas! Release unto us Barabbas!' were the only result of his rough eloquence.

'Stop his mouth!' exclaimed Annas angrily—'He must be mad to prate thus!'

‘Mad or no, ye have yourselves elected him for freedom’—observed Pilate composedly—‘Mayhap ye will now retract, seeing he hath shown a certain generosity towards yon defenceless Nazarene!’

While he spoke, there was a threatening movement of the mob towards the barrier,—the line of Roman soldiery swayed as though it were likely to be broken through by superior force,—and a multitude of hands were tossed aloft in air and pointed at the unmoved patient figure of the Christ.

‘Crucify him! Crucify him!’

Pilate advanced swiftly, close to the ranks of the turbulent populace, and demanded sternly,

‘Shall I crucify your King?’

Amid a chorus of groans and hisses, more than a hundred voices gave reply,—

‘We have no king but Cæsar!’

‘Verily, by thy hesitancy, Pilate, thou wilt have the whole city in tumult!’ said Caiaphas reproachfully. ‘Seest thou not the mob are losing patience?’

At that moment a tall man whose grizzled head was adorned with a showy scarlet turban, detached

himself from the rest of the throng and stood boldly forward, exclaiming in loud excited tones—

‘ We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God ! ’

As he heard these words, Pilate retreated some few steps away from the barrier, with the strange stunned sense of having been struck a sharp blow from an invisible hand. The Son of God ! Such an assertion was assuredly blasphemous, if indeed the Accused had asserted it ! But this was just what Pilate doubted. When Caiaphas had previously spoken of it, he had received the report with contempt, because he knew the high-priest would stop at no falsehood, provided his own immediate ends were thereby attained. But now that one of the populace had come forward with the same accusation, Pilate was forced to look at it in a different light. After all, he was set in his place to administer justice to the Jews, and in the Jewish law blasphemy was regarded as a crime almost worse than murder. He, Pilate himself, as a citizen of Rome, took a different and much lighter view of the offence. For the Roman deities were all so mixed, and so much worse than human in their vengeance

and illicit loves, that it was not always easy to perceive anything more lofty in the character of a god than in that of a man. Any warrior who had won renown for fierce brute courage and muscular prowess, might report himself in Rome as the son of a god without affronting popular feeling, and in time, many-mouthed Tradition would turn his lie into a seeming truth. And in that mysterious land through which the Nile made its languid way, did not travellers speak with awe and wonderment of the worship of Osiris, the incarnate god in human semblance? The idea was a popular one,—it arose from an instinctive desire to symbolise the divine in humanity, and was a fable common to all religions, wherefore there seemed to be little actual harm in the fact of this dreamy-looking poetic young philosopher of Nazareth seeking to associate himself with the favourite myths of the people, if, indeed, he did so associate himself. And Pilate, his thoughts still busy with the romances told of the gods in Egypt, beckoned the Accused towards him. His signal was complied with, and the ‘Nazarene’ moved quietly up to within reach of His judge’s hand. Pilate surveyed Him with renewed

interest and curiosity, then in a low tone of friendly and earnest appeal, asked,

'From whence art thou?'

No verbal answer was vouchsafed to him,—only a look; and in the invincible authority and grandeur of that look there was something of darkness and light intermingled,—something of the drear solemnity of the thunder-cloud before the lightning leaps forth, sword-like, to destroy. A great anguish and foreboding seized Pilate's soul,—with all the force of his being he longed to cry out,—to give voice to his secret trouble, and to openly express before priests and people his abhorrence and rejection of the judicial task he was set to do. But all words seemed strangled in his throat,—and a desperate sense of hopelessness and helplessness paralysed his will.

'Speakest thou not unto me?' he continued, in accents that were hoarse and tremulous with excess of feeling; *'Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and power to release thee?'*

Still steadily the large lustrous eyes regarded him, with something of compassion now in their glance,—

and after a moment's pause, the rich full voice once more cast music on the air :

'Thou couldst have no power at all against me except it were given thee from above !' Then, with a slight sigh of pity and pardon ; *'Therefore, he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin.'*

And the penetrating look flashed upward from Pilate to the tall rigid form of Caiaphas, who shrank from it as though suddenly scorched by a flying flame. Pilate, more than ever impressed by the air of command, power, and entire fearlessness expressed in the whole demeanour of the Prisoner, once again began to puzzle his brain with the recollection of the various stories that were current concerning Egypt,—stories of exiled monarchs, who, banished from their realms by an untoward series of events or for some self-imposed religious intention, went wandering about in all the countries of the world, teaching the mystic wisdom of the East, and performing miracles of healing. Was it not probable that this young Preacher, so unlike the Jewish race in the fair openness and dignity of His countenance, the clear yet deep dark blue of His eyes, and the wonderfully

majestic yet aerial poise of His figure, might, notwithstanding the popular report of His plebeian origin, after all be one of these discrowned nomads? This idea gained on Pilate's fancy, and impelled by its influence he asked for the second time,—

'Art thou a King?'

And by marked accentuation of the question he sought to imply that if such were the original distinction of the Captive, release might yet be obtained. But the 'Nazarene' only gave a slight sigh of somewhat wearied patience as He replied,—

'THOU sayest that I am a King!' Then, apparently moved by commiseration for the vacillating perplexity of His judge, He continued gently,—
'To this end was I born and for this end came I into the world,—That I should bear witness unto the Truth! Every one that is of the Truth knoweth my voice.'

While He thus spoke, Pilate gazed upon Him in solemn astonishment. Here was no traitor or criminal, but simply one of the world's noblest madmen! More convincing than all the other accusations brought against Him by priests and people was His

own unqualified admission of folly. For whosoever sought to 'bear witness unto the Truth' in a world kept up by lies, could not be otherwise than mad! Had it not always been thus? And would it not always be thus? Had not the Athenian Socrates met his death nearly five hundred years ago for merely uttering the Truth? Pilate, more instructed than the majority in Greek and Roman philosophy, knew that no fault was so reprehensible in all classes of society as simple plain-speaking; it was almost safer to murder a man than tell the truth of him! Thus thinking he gave a hopeless gesture of final abandonment to destiny; and with an ironical bitterness he was scarcely conscious of, uttered the never-to-be-forgotten, never-to-be-answered query—

'What is Truth!'

Then, glancing from the Accused to the accusers, from the priests to the people, from the people in turn to Barabbas, who waited before him sullenly expectant, he sighed impatiently, and with the desperately resolved air of one compelled to perform the very act his soul most abhorred, he beckoned to a clerk in attendance and gave him a whispered

order. The man retired, but returned almost immediately bearing a large silver bowl filled with pure water. Flinging back his rich robe of office and allowing it to trail in voluminous folds behind him, Pilate, closely followed by the attendant carrying the silver vessel, stepped forward again to confront the populace who were becoming more contentious and noisy with every moment's delay. On perceiving the governor's advance however, they ceased their turbulent murmurings and angry disputations, and concentrated all their attention upon him, the more particularly as his movements were somewhat strange and unexpected. Rolling up his gold-embroidered sleeves well above his wrists, he raised his bare hands aloft and showed them, palms outward, to the multitude, the great jewels on his fingers flashing like stars in the morning sun. He held them so uplifted for a minute's space, while the people, wondering, looked on in silence,—then, slowly lowering them, he dipped them deep in the shining bowl, rinsing them over and over again in the clear cold element which sparkled in its polished receptacle like an opal against fire. And as he shook the

bright drops away from him, he cried in a loud penetrating voice—

'I am innocent of the blood of this just person! See ye to it!'

The multitude shouted and yelled. They understood and accepted the position. Their Roman judge publicly declined all responsibility in the matter,—even so let it be!—but they, they the elect of God, the children of Judæa, eagerly embraced, and not for the first time in their annals, the righteous opportunity of slaying the innocent. And with one mighty roar they responded, men and women alike,

'His blood be upon us and on our children!'

The hideous, withering, irrevocable Curse rose shudderingly up to Heaven,—there to be inscribed by the Recording Angel in letters of flame as the self-invoked Doom of a people.

VII

AFTER this nothing more could be said. An ignorant and callous mob has neither justice, reason nor pity, yet the popular verdict had to be accepted as final. No appeal could be made against such a grimly resolved and unanimous decision. Pilate saw that had he still ventured to plead the cause of the Divine Accused, the impatience of the crowd, strained to its last limit, would probably break out in riot and bloodshed. He therefore, like a man driven along by a resistless whirlwind, sacrificed his own will to the desire of the people ; and Caiaphas, seeing that he had at last yielded to the force of necessity, heaved a sigh of relief. Hesitation was at an end,—the Man of Nazareth was to die the death. And the great high-priest murmured his satisfaction in the ear of his father-in-law Annas, who listened

servilely, rubbing his fat hands together and every now and then rolling up his small treacherous eyes in pious thanksgiving,—thanksgiving that the Holy City of Jerusalem was to be finally freed from the troublous and alarming presence of the ‘Nazarene.’

‘Once dead,’ whispered Caiaphas, with a contemptuous side-glance at the fair-faced enemy of his craft, the silent ‘Witness unto the Truth’—‘and, moreover, slain with dishonour in the public sight, he will soon sink out of remembrance. His few disciples will be despised,—his fanatical foolish doctrine will be sneered down, and we,—*we* will take heed that no chronicle of his birth or death or teaching remains to be included in our annals. A stray street preacher to the common folk!—how should his name endure?’

‘Nay, it shall not endure,’ returned Annas with an unctuous air of perfect assurance—‘Thou, most holy and exalted Caiaphas, hast ever dwelt too ardently upon this fellow’s boasting. Many there are, such as he, who thus idly vaunt themselves, and swear that though unknown and all unhonoured by their own generation, they shall be acclaimed great and

wonderful hereafter. Arrogant philosophers prate thus,—mad poets who string rhymes as children string beads, and call such fool's work valuable,—heretical thinkers too of all degrees,—yet lo, their vaunting comes to naught! Verily, if History make no mention of this man, who will believe he ever lived!

Caiaphas smiled coldly.

'Little word will there be of him in History,' said he. 'For his crazed followers are ignorant of letters, and our scribes must write only what *we* shall bid them!'

Part of this low-toned conversation was overheard by Zacharias, the old usurer, and he nodded emphatic approval, laughing silently the while. The condemnatory sentence passed on the immortal Captive by the Jewish populace was balm to his mean and miserable soul,—he rejoiced in it as in some excellent and satisfying jest, and he struck his jewelled stick now and then on the pavement, with an ecstatic thump, by way of giving outward expression to his inwardly gratified feeling. Pilate, meantime, having, by the washing of his hands before

the people, openly signified his repugnance and refusal to personally participate in the crime (for so he truly considered it) about to be committed, proceeded with the rest of his enforced duty in feverish haste and something of horror. Nothing could now be done quickly enough to please him,—he grew nervous and excited,—a shamed flush at times burned in his cheeks, and anon he grew ghastly pale again, every line of his features becoming drawn and livid as the features of the dead,—and in all his hurried movements he carefully avoided turning his eyes towards the Man Condemned. At his abrupt signal some twenty soldiers with drawn weapons surrounded the grand white Figure that stood, divinely silent, in the glory of the morning sun,—coarse-visaged, squat-bodied men who laughed and swore among themselves as they eyed their Prisoner up and down and made mocking comments on His stately and unmoved bearing. He,—Himself,—appeared to be almost unconscious of their proximity,—some happy fancy seemed to hover, spirit-like, across His mind, for judging by His radiant aspect, He might have been a crowned Apollo

dreaming of realms wherein his smile alone created light and sound and life. And in the same moment that the military cohort thus fenced Him in with their bristling spears, the two soldiers who had guarded Barabbas until now retired to the rear, leaving their man to receive his formal release at the hands of the governor. Alone,—facing Pilate,—Barabbas waited,—the iron manacles still weightily dragging down his arms and showing where their long and corroding pressure had bruised and cut the flesh beneath. He was giddy with fatigue and excitement, but his black eyes were brilliant, and every nerve and muscle in his body thrilled to the rapturous thought of liberty. His suspense did not last long, for Pilate was now in no humour for delays. Snatching from an attendant officer the implement used for such purposes, he struck at the heavy links of the rescued criminal's chains with such irate violence that they were soon parted asunder and fell, clanging harshly on the marble pavement. The noise made by their fall was sufficient to excite the populace to a burst of triumphant shouting.

‘Barabbas!’

‘Freedom for Barabbas!’

‘Hail, Barabbas!’

Barabbas meanwhile stared at the cast-off fetters with a stupefied air as though they had all at once become curious and unfamiliar objects. He had worn them day and night for eighteen months, yet now it seemed he knew them not. He lifted his arms and swung them to and fro with a sense of bodily ease and lightness,—but where was the buoyancy of spirit that had but a moment before elated him? It was gone; and gone quite suddenly, he knew not how. He had hoped and longed and prayed for freedom,—his hope was fulfilled,—and now, with fulfilment, hope was dead. A heavy despondency overcame him, and he stood dully inert, while he heard Caiaphas say,

‘Wilt thou not fasten yon bracelets upon the Nazarene, good Pilate? Who knoweth but that in going to his death he may not prove rebellious?’

Pilate frowned.

‘What now! Hath he fought with the guard? Hath he moved? Hath he murmured? Hath he spoken aught of violence? He disputeth not judgment,—he doth most mutely accept the fate ye give

him. Therefore why bind that which maketh no resistance? Let Jews be what they will, ye shall not make a coward of a Roman !'

And with this he turned abruptly to Barabbas.

'Why dost thou wait there, fellow? Get thee hence!' and the suppressed irritation he felt quivered in his usually calm voice—'Impenitent murderer and thief as thou art, the laws of thy nation set thee free, to slay and steal again at thy pleasure !'

Barabbas winced, and his dark face flushed. The scathing words cut him deeply, but he found nothing to say in reply. His head drooped somewhat wearily on his chest,—he fully understood he was at liberty,—yet liberty did not now bring with it the complete sense of joy he had thought to find in its possession. Beyond the barrier the people outside waited to receive him with triumphant acclamations,—but his limbs seemed to be fastened to the spot where he stood, and for the life of him he could not help gazing wistfully and remorsefully at the One condemned in his stead.

'It would have been better,' he said within himself, 'to have died for yonder Man, than live on, free.'

As this thought crossed his mind, it seemed to him that a sudden soft light shone round the uplifted head of the 'Nazarene,'—a ring of pale and misty radiance that gradually deepened into a warm glow of golden flame. He gazed at this phenomenon affrighted,—surely others saw the glory as well as himself? Judge, priests, soldiers and people, could it be possible they were blind to what was so distinctly visible? He tried to speak and tell them,—but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he could only stare like one distraught, striving to utter words that refused to become audible. Caiaphas, impatient at his apparent stupidity and unwillingness to move, stepped up to him.

'Didst thou not hear the governor's command, thou fool? Get thee hence quickly! Take heed to thy ways, and see thou venture not near the house of Iscariot!'

This injunction pronounced in an angry whisper, roused Barabbas from his amazed contemplation of the Christ to a sudden silent access of personal fury. The glory-light vanished from the brows of the prophet of Nazareth,—there was no more wonder,

no more mystic terror ;—material life and its demands rose paramount in his mind. With a look of indignant scorn and rebellion flashed full in the face of the great high-priest, he straightened himself proudly to his full height, and turning his back on the Hall of Judgment strode swiftly towards the barrier dividing him from the populace, the Roman soldiers making way for him to pass. A moment more, and he had sprung into the midst of the crowd, where he was received with frenzied yells of delight and prolonged cheering. An exultant mob gathered round him, shouting his name,—men embraced him,—women caught his grimy hands and kissed them,—little children danced about him whooping and shrieking with joy, not knowing why they did so, but simply infected by the excitement of their elders,—one man in the height of enthusiasm tore off a rich upper mantle from his own shoulders and flung it around the half-naked, half-starved form of the newly-released criminal, shedding tears of emotion the while. Not a trace was left of the previous aversion shown towards him when first he had been marched into the Tribunal, a prisoner under armed escort,—the

public, more fickle than the wind, were full of rejoicing over the fact that *their* word and *their* will had obtained his release,—and, to judge by their jubilant cries, the once notorious murderer might have been a king returning to throne and country after long exile. A large section of the crowd forgot for the moment that Other, who was left to His fate and condemned to die,—they were content to press round their own rescued man with joyous greeting and laughter, praying him to partake of food and wine with them at the nearest inn, or urging him to accompany them in turn to their several homes. Breathless and bewildered, and incongruously clad in the silk and gold-threaded garment his philanthropic admirer had wound about him, Barabbas looked from right to left, wondering how best he might elude the enthusiastic attentions which threatened to overwhelm his small stock of patience. For he himself was not elated with his triumph; he knew, better than most men, the true value of ‘friends’ as this world goes; and he felt more weariness and impatience than anything else, as his eyes roved anxiously over the surging sea of heads in search of

one face that he fancied was sure to be there,—a face that for him was all he realised of heaven. But he failed to discover what he sought, and, chilled by his disappointment, he scarcely heard the various items of news and gossip some of his former acquaintances were pouring into his ears. All at once a murmur ran from lip to lip,—

‘Look you, they scourge him!’

Like an ocean wave rolling inshore, the crowd moved by one instinct, turned, swaying impetuously back towards the Hall of Judgment. Standing on tip-toe they craned their necks over each other’s shoulders to see what was going on,—men lifted tiny children in their arms,—some few, principally women, uttered smothered exclamations of pity,—but on the whole a mercilessly pleased air of expectation pervaded the throng. Barabbas, carried along by the force of the mob, found himself facing the Tribunal once more, and being a tall man he was able to command a better view than most of those immediately around him.

‘Brutes!’ he muttered as he saw—‘Dogs! Devils! To strike a man defenceless! O coward bravery!’

And with strained eyes and heavily beating heart

he watched the scene. The Tribunal seemed now to be well-nigh possessed by the Roman guards, for several extra soldiers had been summoned to aid in the pitiless deed about to be done. In the centre of a ring of bristling spears and drawn battle-axes stood the 'Nazarene,' offering no resistance to the rude buffetings of the men who violently stripped Him of His upper garments, leaving His bare shoulders and breast exposed to view. An officer meantime handed the scourge to Pilate,—a deadly-looking instrument made of several lengths of knotted whip-cord, fringed with small nail-like points of sharpened iron. It was part of the procurator's formal duty to personally chastise a condemned criminal,—but the unhappy man upon whom, in this dreadful instance, the allotted task now fell, shuddered in every limb, and, pushing away the barbarous thong, made a faint mute gesture of denial. The officer waited, his dull heavy face exhibiting as much surprise as discipline would allow. The soldiers waited, staring inquisitively. And in equable sweetness and silence the Man of Nazareth also waited, the sunlight giving a polished luminance to His bared shoulders and arms, dazzling in their

whiteness, statuesque in their symmetry,—the while He lifted His deep pensive eyes, and regarded His miserable judge with a profound and most tender pity. Caiaphas and his father-in-law exchanged vexed glances.

‘Dost thou yet delay justice, Pilate?’ questioned the high-priest haughtily—‘Time presses. Do what thy duty bids thee,—strike!’

VIII

BUT Pilate still hesitated, gazing blankly out into nothingness. His face was pallid,—his lips were set hard,—his erect figure, clothed in rich attire, looked curiously stiff and lifeless like that of a frozen man. Would that the sick qualm at his heart might overcome him altogether, he thought, so that, falling in a senseless swoon, he might escape the shame and horror of striking that kingly Gentleness, that embodied Patience! But life and consciousness throbbed through him, albeit painfully and confusedly; the people whom he was set to govern, demanded of him the full performance of his work. Mechanically he at last stretched forth his hand and grasped the scourge,—then, with a faltering step and downcast eyes approached the Condemned. The soldiers, anticipating the scourging, had, notwithstand-

ing Pilate's objection to bind 'that which maketh no resistance,' tied their passive Captive's hands with rope, lest He should attempt to defend Himself from the falling blows. On these needless and unmerited bonds, Pilate first of all fixed his glance, a great wrath and sorrow contending within him. But he was powerless to alter or soften the conditions of the law,—he was the wretched tool of destiny,—and with a bitter loathing of himself and the shameful thing he was compelled to do, he turned away his eyes and, . . . lifted the lash. It dropped heavily with a stinging hiss on the tender flesh,—again and again it rose, . . . again and again it fell, . . . till the bright blood sprang from beneath its iron points and splashed in red drops on the marble pavement. . . . But no sound passed the lips of the Divine Sufferer,—not so much as a sigh of pain,—and no prophetic voice uplifted itself to proclaim the truth,—*'He was wounded for our transgressions, and by His stripes are we healed!'*

Meanwhile, a strange and unaccountable silence possessed the people watching outside,—pressing close against one another, they peered with eager

curious eyes at the progress of the punishment,—till at last, when the scourge caught in its cruel prongs a strand of the Captive's gold-glistening hair, and, tearing it out, cast it, wet with blood, on the ground, a girl in the crowd broke out into hysterical sobbing. The sound of woman's weeping scared Pilate in his dreadful task,—he looked up, flushed and fevered, with wild eyes and a wilder smile and paused. Zacharias the usurer hobbled forward, excitedly waving his jewelled staff in the air.

‘To it again, and harder, most noble governor!’ he yelled in his cracked and tremulous voice, ‘To it again, with better will! Such blows as thine would scarcely hurt a child! He scourged others,—let him taste of the thong himself! Look you, he hath not winced nor cried out,—he hath not yet felt the lash! To it again in justice, excellent Pilate! in simple justice! He hath scourged me, an aged man and honest,—verily it is right and fitting he should receive the sting in his own flesh, else shall he die impenitent! Again, and yet again, most worthy governor,—but let the stripes be heavier!’

As he spoke, gesticulating violently, his stick

suddenly slipped from his shaking hand and dropped on the marble floor, and a great pearl, loosened from its setting in the jewelled handle, flew out, rolled away like a bead, and disappeared. With a shriek of anguish, the miserable man fell on his knees and began to grope along the pavement with his yellow claw-like fingers, shedding maudlin tears, while he entreated the impassive soldiers standing by to aid him in looking for the precious lost gem. A grim smile went the round of the band, but not a man moved. Moaning and whimpering, the wretched usurer crept slowly on all-fours over the floor of the Tribunal, keeping his eyes close to the ground, and presenting the appearance of some loathly animal rather than a man, the while he every now and again paused and prodded with his filthy hands into every nook and corner in hope to find the missing jewel. The loss was to him irreparable, and in his grief and rage he had even forgotten his desire of vengeance on the 'Nazarene.' Pilate, watching him as he crawled about, weeping childishly, was moved by such a sense of pleasure at his discomfiture as to feel almost light-hearted for the moment,—and,

breaking into a loud laugh of unnatural hilarity, he flung away the blood-stained scourge with the relieved air of one whose disagreeable task was now finished. But Caiaphas was by no means satisfied.

‘Thou hast given yon condemned malefactor but the mildest scourging, Pilate,’ he said—‘Why hast thou cast aside the lash so soon?’

Pilate’s eyes flashed fire.

‘Press not my humour too far, thou vengeful priest!’ he muttered breathlessly—‘I have done my accursed work. See ye to the rest!’

Caiaphas retreated a step or two, somewhat startled. There was something in the expression of Pilate’s face that was truly terrifying,—a dark and ghastly anguish that for the moment disturbed even the high-priest’s cold and self-satisfied dignity. After a brief pause however, he recovered his wonted composure, and by a sign to the centurion in command, intimated that the scourging was over, and that the Prisoner was now abandoned to His fate. And, this culminating point having been reached, all the members of the Sanhedrim, together with the scribes and elders

present, saluted the governor ceremoniously and left the Tribunal, walking slowly down two by two into the lower hall called 'Prætorium.' Thither too, the soldiers were preparing to lead or drag the doomed Nazarene. Filing away in solemn and dignified order, the sacerdotal procession gradually disappeared, and only Pilate lingered, chained to the spot by a sort of horrible fascination. Sheltering himself from the public view behind a massive marble column, he leaned against that cold support in utter weariness, broken in body and mind by the fatigue and, to him, inexplicable anguish of the morning's trial. In his dazed brain he strove hard to realise what it was, what it could be, that made him feel as if the most unutterable crime ever committed on earth was about to be perpetrated this very day in this very city of Jerusalem. He had become a torturing problem to himself,—he could not understand his own overwhelming emotion. His wife's message had greatly disturbed him; he had thrust the scroll hurriedly in his breast, but now he drew it out and once more re-read the strange injunction,—

'Have thou nothing to do with that just man, for I

have suffered this day many things in a dream because of him.'

Mysterious words!—what could they mean? What could she, Justitia, the proud, fearless and beautiful woman of Rome have 'suffered'? In a dream, too,—she who scarcely ever dreamed,—who laughed at auguries and omens, and had even been known to say satirical things against the gods themselves! She was totally unimaginative; and to a certain extent her nature was hard and pitiless, or what her own people would have termed 'heroic.' She would look on, pleased and placid, at the most hideous gladiatorial contests and other barbarous spectacles then in vogue in her native city,—when she was but twelve years of age she had watched unmoved the slow torturing of a slave condemned to be flayed alive for theft and perjury. Hence, this action of hers in protesting against the condemnation of any particular criminal, was sufficiently unusual and unlike her to be remarkable. '*Have thou nothing to do with that just man!*' What would she say if she could see that same 'just man' now! Pilate, looking fearfully round from his retired coign of vantage, turned sick and cold at the horror of the

scene that was being enacted,—but though he would have given his life to interfere, he knew that he dared not. The people had declared their will,—and that will must needs be done. There was no help and no hope for a Truth unanimously condemned by this world's liars. There never has been, and there never shall be!

The previous intense silence of the multitude had given way to fierce clamour; the air resounded with discordant bellowings as though a herd of wild beasts had broken loose to ravage the earth. The soldiery, no longer restrained by the presence of sacerdotal authority, and moreover incited to outrage by the yells of the mob, were violently pushing their Prisoner along with the butt-ends of their weapons in a brutal endeavour to make Him lose His footing and fall headlong down the steps that led into the Prætorium. Their savage buffetings were unprovoked assaults, dealt out of a merely gratuitous desire to insult the sublime Sufferer,—for He Himself gave them no cause of affront, but went with them peaceably. His shoulders still bare, were bleeding from the scourge,—His hands and arms were still tightly bound,—yet neither pain

nor humiliation had lessened the erect majesty of His bearing or the aerial pride of his step,—and His beautiful eyes kept the lustrous, dreamy splendour of a thought and a knowledge beyond all human ken. Pressing close about Him His ruffianly guards derided Him with mocking gestures and laughter, shouting obscenities in His ears and singing scraps of ribald songs. A scarlet mantle had been left by chance on one of the benches in the Hall, and this was spied out by one of the men, who snatched it up in haste and flung it across the Captive's wounded shoulders. It trailed behind Him in regal flowing folds; and the fellow who had thrown it thus in position, gave a wild shout, and pointing with his pike exclaimed derisively,

'Hail, King of the Jews!'

Shrieks of applause and bursts of laughter answered this ebullition of wit, and Barabbas alone out of all the callous crowd made protest.

'Shame!' he cried,—'Shame on you, Romans! Shame on you, people of Jerusalem! Why mock that which is condemned?'

But his voice was lost in the uproar around him, or

if not utterly lost, it fell unheeded on the ears of those who did not choose to hear. And anon, a fresh burst of taunting merriment split the air into harsh echoings, — a new phase of bitter jesting moved the crowd, — the 'King' was being crowned! A spearman acting on the initiative given by his fellow, had leaped into the outer garden-court, and had there torn from the wall three long branches of a climbing rose, thick with thorns. Pulling off all the delicate buds, blossoms and leaves, he twisted the prickly stems into a coronal, and with this approached the silent Christ, his companions greeting him with hoarse yells of approving laughter.

'*Hail, King of the Jews!*' he cried, as he placed it on the Divine brows, pressing the spiky circlet fiercely down into the tender flesh till the pained blood sprang beneath its pressure — 'Hail, all hail!'

And he struck the fair and tranquil Face with his steel gauntlet.

'A sceptre! A sceptre for the King!' shouted a little lad, running out from the crowd excitedly, and waving a light reed aloft as he came. The soldiers

laughed again, and snatching the reed, set it upright between the bound wrists of their blameless Captive. Then with devilish howlings and wild gestures, a group of disorderly ruffians rushed forward pell-mell and dropped on their knees, turning up their grimy grinning faces in pretended worship and mocking servility, the while they yelled in frantic chorus,

‘Hail! *Hail, King of the Jews!*’

They might as well have stormed the Sun, or flung insults at a Star. Mystically removed above and beyond them all was the Man of Sorrows,—His lips, close set in that wondrous curve of beauty such as sculptors give to the marble god of song, opened not for any utterance of word or cry;—scarcely indeed did He appear to breathe, so solemn and majestic a stillness encompassed Him. That tranquil silence irritated the mob,—it implied perfect courage, indifference to fate, heroic fortitude, and sublime endurance,—and thus seemed to be a dignified, dumbly declared scorn of the foolish fury of the people.

‘A curse on him!’ cried a man in the crowd—

‘Hath he no tongue? Hath he no more doctrines to teach before he dies? Make him speak!’

‘Speak, fellow!’ roared a soldier, striking him heavily on the shoulder with the handle of his spear, ‘Thou hast babbled oft of both sin and righteousness,—how darest thou now hold thy peace?’

But neither taunt nor blow could force an answer from the immortal ‘King.’ His noble features were composed and calm,—His luminous eyes looked straight ahead as though beholding some glory afar off in shining distance,—and only the slow drops of blood starting from under the sharp points of His thorny crown, and staining the bright hair that clustered on His temples, gave any material evidence of life or feeling.

‘*He hath a devil!*’ shouted another man—‘He is hardened in impenitence and feels nothing. *Away with him! Let him be crucified!*’

While this incessant clamour was going on, Pilate had stood apart, watching the scene with the doubtful and confused sensations of a man in delirium. As in some horrid vision, he beheld the stately Figure, draped in the scarlet robe and crowned with thorns,

being hustled along the Prætorium towards the open court outside, which had to be reached by yet another descending flight of steps,—and, yielding to a sudden impulse he moved quickly forward, so that he came in the way of the advancing guard. Seeing him appear thus unexpectedly, the centurion in command paused. The soldiers too, somewhat taken aback at being caught in their brutal horse-play by no less a personage than the governor himself, ceased their noisy shouts abruptly and rested on their weapons, sullenly silent. Once more, and for the last time on earth, Pilate ventured to look straight at the Condemned. Bruised, bound and bleeding, the twisted rose-thorns setting their reluctant prongs ever more deeply into his brows, the ‘Nazarene’ met that questioning, appealing, anguished human gaze with a proud yet sweet serenity ; while Pilate, staring wildly in terror and wonderment, saw that above the crown of thorns there glittered a crown of Light,—light woven in three intertwined rays of dazzling gold and azure, which cast prismatic reflections upward, like meteor-flames flashing between earth and heaven. A Crown of Light ! . . . a mystic Circle, widening, ever

widening into burning rings that seemed endless, . . . how came such glory there? What could it mean? Like a drowning man desperately clutching at a floating spar while sinking in the depths of the sea, so Pilate clutched vaguely and half blindly at the flowing scarlet mantle, which, as a symbol of the world's mockery robed the regal form of the world's Redeemer, and dragged at it as though he sought to pull its wearer forward. The clamorous touch was obeyed; the Man of Nazareth suffered Himself to be led by His judge to the summit of the last flight of steps leading downwards and outwards from the Prætorium. There, He fully faced the assembled multitude in all His sorrowful sublimity and tragic splendour; and for a moment deep silence ruled the throng. Then, suddenly heart-stricken and overwhelmed at the sight of such pure and piteous majesty, Pilate dropped the edge of the scarlet robe as though it had scorched his flesh.

‘ECCE HOMO!’ he exclaimed, tossing up his arms as he shrieked the words out in his native tongue, careless as to whether they were understood or not by the startled Jewish crowd—‘ECCE HOMO!’

And breaking into a wild fit of delirious laughter and weeping, he flung his mantle desperately across his mouth to stifle the agonised convulsion, and swerving aside giddily, fell, face forward on the ground, insensible.

IX

A LOUD cry went up from the multitude, and in the consternation and confusion which ensued, the crowd swiftly divided itself into various sections. Some rushed to proffer assistance in lifting the unconscious governor and carrying him to his palace; others gathered once more around the released Barabbas with fresh adulation and words of welcome,—but by far the larger half of the mob prepared to follow the Divine Condemned and see Him die. Fearful and unnatural as it seems, it is nevertheless true that in all ages the living have found a peculiar and awful satisfaction in watching the agonies of the dying. To be alive, and to look on while a fellow-creature gasps out in torture the last reluctant breath, is a position that has always given a mysteriously horrible pleasure to the majority.

And on this particular day more than the customary morbid diversion was expected, for a rumour had gone the round of the populace that two notorious thieves were to be executed at the same time as the young 'prophet' out of Galilee. Such a spectacle was assuredly worth waiting for!—and accordingly they waited, a motley-garbed, restless, expectant mass of men and women, the perpetual hum of their voices sounding like the noise made by thousands of swarming bees, the while they occasionally varied the monotony of speech by singing, stamping and whistling. The Roman soldiers, greatly disconcerted by Pilate's sudden and inexplicable illness, and in their own mind superstitiously connecting it with some spell they imagined to have been secretly wrought by the 'Nazarene,' were now in no mood for trifling. Dragging off the scarlet robe from their Prisoner, they hastily flung His own raiment upon Him, and with many dark and threatening looks, led Him forth, closely guarded.

The morning was intensely hot and bright,—in the outer court a fountain was in full play, casting up a silvery column of foam-dust to the burning blue

of the sky. The whole band of soldiers halted while their centurion conferred apart with the criminal executioner, whose duty it was to provide crosses suitable for the legal mode of punishment then in vogue, and who also was bound to assist in nailing those condemned, in the barbarous position needful to ensure a lingering and horrible death. Three crosses were required that day, he said,—and he was in doubt as to whether any that he had were sufficiently strong to sustain the powerful and splendid figure of the Captive now pointed out to him.

‘I’ faith I am sorry he is condemned,’ he muttered with a touch of commiseration in his rough accents,—‘He hath a noble presence, and of a surety to slay him thus shamefully is an error, Petronius. Believe me, so thou wilt find it! Rememberest thou not how one of thine own calling, dwelling in Capernaum, had his servant sick of a palsy, and yonder man did heal him without so much as visiting the house where he lay? I tell thee, mischief will come of his death. And now I look at thee, thou hast a sober air,—thou art not in tune with this deed, methinks?’

Petronius lowered his eyes, and meditatively traced out the pattern of the pavement with the point of his drawn weapon.

‘Our governor hath not condemned him’—he said in a low tone,—‘And therefore Rome is not responsible. Pilate would have saved him,—but the Jews have willed otherwise.’

‘Ay, ay!’ grumbled the executioner, himself a native of Apulia,—‘The Jews, the Jews! Dark and bloody are their annals, Jove knoweth!—and they have been known to murder their own children to please the savage deity they worship. Look you, the fat priests devour the firstlings of a flock in their own houses, pretending ’tis their God who hath such greedy appetite,—and those among them who accumulate more gold than is lawful will swear that even high rates of usury are the divine blessing on the righteous! Hypocrites all, Petronius!—but yonder Prisoner is not a Jew?’

The centurion looked wistfully at the Condemned, now re-clothed in His own white garments, but still wearing the crown of thorns. A smile irradiated His fair face,—His soft eyes were watching with tenderness

the dainty caperings of a butterfly that fluttered for mere joyous caprice just near enough to the fountain to catch a drop or two on its azure wings, and then danced off again high up into the sunshine. Even so absorbed and gentle might have been His aspect when He said, '*Behold the lilies of the field! They toil not, neither do they spin,—and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these!*'

'He is not—he cannot be a Jew?' repeated the executioner questioningly.

'Yea, verily he is a Jew,' replied Petronius at last with a slight sigh,—‘Or so it is reported. He is of that vile Nazareth; the son of Joseph the carpenter there,—and Mary his mother is, or was, here a while ago with the women.’

The executioner shook his head obstinately.

'Thou wilt never make me believe it!' he said,—‘He hath the air of an alien to this land. Look you, there is no face like his in the crowd,—he is neither Greek nor Roman nor Egyptian,—but though I cannot fix his race I would swear his father was never a Jew! And as for the cross, ye will all have to wait

while I go and test which is the strongest and least worn, for, on my life, it must lift up a Hercules! Seest thou not what height and muscle?—what plenitude of vigour?—By Jupiter! an' I were he I would make short work of the guard!'

Chuckling hoarsely at what he considered an excellent jest, he disappeared on his gruesome errand, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. The rest of the troop remained surrounding the 'Nazarene,' while the crowd of spectators increased every moment, extending itself far into the street beyond. All the people were growing more and more excited and impatient,—some of them were conscious of a certain vague disappointment and irritation. There was no amusement in seeing a Man condemned to death if He refused to be interested in His own fate, and stood waiting as resignedly and patiently as this 'prophet of Nazareth,' who looked more happy than pained. Several minutes elapsed, and the cross had not yet been brought. The enforced delay seemed likely to be prolonged, and several thirsty souls edged themselves out of the crush to get refreshment while they had time and opportunity. Among these was

Barabbas. Some former old acquaintances of his had taken possession of him, and now insisted upon his accompanying them, somewhat against his will, into an inn close by, where they drank his health with boisterous acclamations. Barabbas ate and drank with them,—and the natural avidity of an almost starving man enabled him to assume the air of a boon companionship he was far from feeling, but when his appetite was moderately appeased, he pushed away the remaining morsels and sat silent and abstracted in the midst of the loud laughter and jesting around him.

‘What ails thee, man?’ cried one of his entertainers presently—‘Thou art duller than a dying dog! Where is thy once reckless merriment?’

‘Gone!’ answered Barabbas harshly, his black eyes growing more sombre and serious as he spoke,—‘In the old days I was merry, and I knew not why,—now I am sad, and know not the cause of my sadness. I have suffered long,—I am weary!—and, . . . and, . . . methinks it is a crime to slay yon Nazarene!’

His words were met with laughter.

‘By my soul, Barabbas,’ exclaimed one man,

clanking his pewter goblet on the table as a sign that he desired it refilled—‘Thou hast come out of prison with the sentiments of a woman! Thou, the wolf, hast crawled forth a lamb! Ha ha ha ha! Who would have thought it? Thou that didst so neatly slip thy knife into the mealy maw of Gabrias, thou, of all men whimperest for another death which concerns thee not, and is, by all the laws, deserved.’

‘‘Tis not deserved!’ muttered Barabbas—‘The Man is innocent!’

He paused, and rose from his seat involuntarily. His companions stopped drinking and stared at him.

‘I tell ye all,’ he continued firmly—‘there is no sin in that young Prophet. He hath done many good things by your own report,—and,—looking at him a while since I saw’——

He broke off,—there was a strange terror in his eyes, and he shuddered.

‘What?’ cried his friends in chorus—‘Surely thou hast a devil, thou also! What sawest thou?’

‘Nothing!’ and Barabbas turned upon them with

a chill smile—‘Nothing that ye would have seen or cared to see!’

They all regarded him in open-eyed wonderment. Was this indeed Barabbas?—this meditative, wistful, thinking man? Was this the lawless, wild associate of the roystering band of rebels who, with a little surface knowledge and bombastic prating in the open streets had actually succeeded, not so very long ago, in disturbing the peace of the city of Jerusalem? And while they remained silent, dumbfounded and perplexed, a calm voice, melodious yet ironical, suddenly addressed them—

‘Pardon me, excellent sirs, for breaking in upon cheerful converse,—but I seek to pay homage where homage is due, and I would fain give humble greeting, I also, to him who is elected of the people. Great are the children of Israel, beloved in all ages of the one true God who naturally hath no sort of interest in the fates of other nations!—great is their verdict on every question, and for ever unerring their decision! Great must he be who fortunately wins their favour,—therefore, great is Barabbas, and to him I proffer salutation!’

No language could adequately describe the various inflections of tone in which this little speech was given. Every note in the gamut of delicate satire seemed sounded,—and instinctively all present turned to look at the speaker. And as they looked, many shrank back in evident apprehension,—Barabbas however, being unacquainted with the new-comer, regarded him indifferently as he would any other stranger, though not without a certain touch of curiosity. He saw before him an olive-complexioned man of rather small stature, slight in build, yet apparently wiry and vigorous, with a somewhat long oval face, straight black brows, and eyes so glittering and strangely-coloured that they might have been iridescent jewels set in his head rather than organs of vision. They were dark eyes apparently, but there was a curious dull gold tint in the iris like clouded amber, that made them look almost light at times, and gave them a singularly unearthly lustre and expression. Their owner was clad in a foreign garb of soft yellowish material girded about him with a broad band of flexible gold,—the upper part of his loose mantle formed a kind of hood or cowl which

was partially pulled over his thick black hair, and fastened at his throat with a clasp of opals. He seemed discreetly amused at the disquieting effect his appearance had on most of the men assembled at the inn, but he advanced nevertheless and bowed profoundly to Barabbas, who gave him no other response than a stare.

‘Excellent Barabbas!’ he continued in the same curiously cold, yet perfectly sweet accents,—‘Deny me not, I pray thee, the satisfaction of thy friendship! I am but a wanderer and an alien in these provinces of Judæa so specially favoured by a discriminating Jehovah,—a veritable barbarian in my ways, knowing little, though studying much,—but in matters pertaining to thy welfare, thou shalt perchance find me useful, whether thy quest be of war or—love!’

Barabbas started,—one of his friends pulled him aside, whispering,—

‘’Tis Melchior. Best humour him! He hath an evil name and holdeth sovereignty over devils!’

‘I know him not’—said Barabbas aloud, disdain-
ing the warning nods and winks of the various

members of the company present,—‘And therefore his greeting profiteth me nothing.’

The stranger smiled.

‘I love honesty!’ he said suavely,—‘And thou, Barabbas, art honest!’ A rough ripple of subdued mirth went the round of the men, and Barabbas winced as though the point of a lash had stung his flesh. ‘True it is that thou knowest me not; equally true it is that thou *shalt* know me. Melchior is my name as thy ear-whisperer hath stated, but of sovereignty over devils I am innocent, inasmuch as I rule no men!’ His eyes lightened and flashed a topaz brilliancy under the heavy blackness of his brows as he continued—‘What motley garb is this?’ and he felt between finger and thumb the texture of the embroidered mantle which had been flung round Barabbas on his release from prison—‘Thou art all but naked beneath this glistening show,—a noble emblem of humanity in very truth! Even thus did I expect to find thee,—robed as a king without, but within, the merest squalid nudity! Follow me and be cleansed of thy prison foulness,—I have my dwelling for the present here in this hostelry,—and

in mine upper chamber thou canst prank thyself out in fitting attire to meet the eyes of thy beloved, for as thou art, most surely she will laugh at thee! Hath she not laughed at thee before? Come and be garmented for festival!’

But Barabbas held his ground, though his dark cheek flushed at the stranger’s familiar allusions to his ‘beloved.’ Drawing the rich robe he wore more closely about him, he gave a gesture of haughty refusal.

‘I obey no man’s bidding,’ he said,—‘I have not been so lately set at liberty that I should now become a slave. Think me not churlish that I refuse thy proffered service,—time passes swiftly, and behold, in the space of moments I go hence with the multitude,—I fain would see the death of the condemned Nazarene.’

Melchior’s face changed. A dark shadow swept across his features,—an expression of mingled sorrow and solemnity.

‘Thou shalt most assuredly behold that death!’ he said,—‘For will not all the world be there? ’Tis Humanity’s great Feast of Slaughter!—the apotheosis of the Jews! A true gala!—a thing to remember!—

mark me, a thing to remember I tell thee! For in ages to come, perchance, the story of how this Man of Nazareth was slain to satisfy the blood-thirstiness of the God-elected children of Israel, may serve as a wonder and terror to time!’ He paused,—his countenance cleared, and he resumed his former ironical tone, ‘Yea, thou shalt see the prophet die,—but believe me when I tell thee that she whom thou lovest will also be there, and hast thou the look of a lover?—clad thus foolishly, and uncouth as an escaped bear?’ He laughed lightly. ‘Yet nevertheless I will not ask thee to do my bidding, most self-reliant and excellent Barabbas! I do but tell thee that in my upper chamber here, thou canst be decently garbed if so thou willest. And maybe thou shalt hear private news of import. Please thy humour! Follow, not me, but thine own inclination!’

He nodded carelessly to the staring company, and passing through the room with a soft, almost cat-like tread, he began to ascend a dark and narrow flight of stone stairs leading to the second floor of the inn. Startled and bewildered by his mysterious words and manner, Barabbas watched the yellow glimmer of his

garments vanishing upwards by degrees till he had quite disappeared,—then, like a man driven by some irresistible necessity, he muttered an incoherent excuse to his amazed companions, and in a blind, unreasoning, unconquerable impulse, rushed after him.

X

‘H E is mad!’

‘Melchior, or Barabbas,—which?’

‘Both!’

These and other similar exclamations broke from most of the men assembled in the common room of the inn. Melchior’s sudden entrance, his conversation with the newly-liberated criminal, and finally, his departure followed by the headlong exit of Barabbas himself, had all taken place within a few minutes, and the incident had left an impression of stupefied wonderment on those who had witnessed it.

‘Who is this Melchior?—what is his calling?’ demanded one man suspiciously—‘What country is he of?—how cometh he here in Jerusalem?’

There was a silence. No one seemed ready with a reply. The keeper of the inn, a middle-aged Jew of

servile and propitiatory manners, edged himself gradually within the circle of his customers, and coughing softly to attract attention, said—

‘Methinks, good sirs, ye mistake him greatly in giving him an evil repute merely for the unexplained frequency of his visits to the city. He is assuredly a man of wealth and wisdom,—though as to what land he journeyeth from, none can say truly, though of my own poor opinion, I would deem his birthplace in Egypt. Concerning his business here he hath none save the following of his own pleasure,—he comes and goes,—and hath ever left some poor man the richer for his sojourn.’

‘Like enough thou speakest well of him, Ben Ezra!’ laughed one of his auditors—‘Thou knowest the trick of lining thy pouch with gold! ’Twould be but a fool’s error to wag thy tongue against this alien whom thou shelterest while thou dost charge him double fees for food and lodgment! Go to! Thou canst not judge of him fairly,—good ready money doth quickly purchase good opinion!’

Ben Ezra smiled amicably and began to clear away some of the emptied pewter flagons.

‘Doubtless ye are all well-skilled in such matters,’ he replied indifferently—‘No host maligns a paying customer. Nevertheless, the worthy Melchior comporteth himself with such excellent good discretion that I see no cause wherein ye should take fear of him,—he hath done no man harm.’

‘Not that thou knowest of, belike’—said a surly fellow, rising from his seat, and preparing to depart, ‘But they that are reported harmless, often by spells and incantations, inflict most deadly injuries. Witness yon crazed and sinful Prophet of Nazareth!—hath he not the face of an angel?—and yet he hath cursed the Holy Temple, and sworn that not one stone shall remain upon another to show what it hath been! Lo, for such evil boasting his death shall scarce atone! And did not his mere glance this morning send Pilate almost mad, and plunge him in a deadly swoon?’

‘Ay, ay! Thou sayest truly!’

And, reminded of the impending triple execution about to take place, the whole company rose up to leave the inn, and began to pay their various reckonings with the landlord. While they were thus

engaged, a great roar went up from the waiting multitude outside,—a hoarse discordant sound of savagery and menace. Glancing comprehensively at one another, the party of wine-drinkers hastily settled their accounts and made a general rush from the inn, out into the street, where, though they knew it not, the most strangely imposing and wondrous spectacle that was ever seen or would ever be seen in the world awaited them,—the spectacle of a God led forth to die!

The crowd had increased so enormously that the road was completely blocked. Tradesmen with hand-carts and pedlars leading pack-mules could not pass, and had to turn back and find their way through the dark and tortuous by-streets of the city to their various destinations. Children lost themselves in the crush and went about crying, in search of their parents,—a party of travellers newly arrived from Damascus by the caravan route, got wedged with their worn-out horses and mules in the thick of the mob and could not move an inch. As far as the eye could see, the vari-coloured throng heaved restlessly to and fro under the blaze of the

brilliant sun, and moving slowly and majestically in the midst of all, came the thorn-crowned 'Nazarene.' His hands and arms had been newly and more strongly bound, and were now tied behind Him so that He could not touch anything, or attempt by so much as a gesture to awaken the sympathies of the people. Soldiers encircled Him with a ring of glittering spears,—and following Him closely came four men, of whom one was the executioner, labouring under the cumbrous weight of a huge Cross some ten feet in height, the lower end of which scraped gratingly along in the dust, the thick beam being too heavy to lift up completely. As they caught sight of the cruel instrument of death, the populace set up an ecstatic yell of ferocious applause and satisfaction, and turned their faces all with one accord towards the place of execution, which they understood to be a small hill outside the town, sometimes called Golgotha, and sometimes Calvary. At the moment when the huge human mass thus began to move in one pre-determined direction, two additional spectators joined the swarming rabble,—they were Barabbas and Melchior. Barabbas, clad in tunic,

vest and mantle of a dense blackish purple, bordered with gold, his rough beard combed and trimmed, and a loose hood of white linen pulled over the thick mass of his wild black hair, looked a very different personage to the half-naked, reckless ruffian who had been set free of the criminal dungeons that very morning. He kept close beside his mysterious new acquaintance, watching him anxiously from time to time as though afraid to lose sight of him. His countenance was grave and composed and not without a certain harsh beauty of expression,—and he walked with an informal grace and ease that was almost dignity. Now and then his eyes wandered over the crowd in front of him to the white figure of the condemned ‘King of the Jews,’ whose shining head, circled with the prickly coronal, rose visibly like a featured Star above all the rest of the surging thousands.

‘’Tis a crime to slay the innocent,’—he muttered. ‘Condone it as they will, it is a crime.’

Melchior gave him a keen critical glance.

‘Nothing is a crime if the people swear by it’—he said—‘And to slay the innocent hath ever been

man's delight. Doth he not trap the singing-birds and draw his knife across the throat of the fawn? Doth he not tear up the life of a blameless tree and choke the breath of flowers in the grasp of his hand? What would'st thou, thou meditative black-browed son of Judæa? Physically or morally, the innocent are always slain in this world. No one believes in a pure body—still less do they believe in a pure soul. Pure soul and pure body are there in yonder thorn-crowned Monarch of many lands,—and lo you how we all troop forth to see him die!’

Barabbas was silent, troublously revolving in his own mind the phrase ‘Monarch of many lands.’

‘What is death?’ pursued Melchior,—‘Why doth it seem so hard a matter? ’Tis the end of all men. Yet whosoever slays the guilty shall be punished,—witness thyself, Barabbas, who didst rid the world of a lying knave. Clad in the skin of hypocrisy was the eminent Gabrias, and thou didst send him into outer darkness with one thrust of thy blade! That was not wisely done, thou fierce-blooded rascal! for he was an evil man protected by the law, whereas a

good and just Man walketh yonder to His death, condemned by the Jews, and the Jews are not punished—*yet!*'

As he finished speaking there was a loud crashing noise and a shout, and the march of the multitude suddenly stopped. The great Cross had slipped from the grasp of the men supporting it, and its huge weight falling heavily sideways had well-nigh crushed one of the crowd who had ventured too near it. It was a matter of some difficulty to get it up from the ground again, and when the bearers had at last succeeded in partially raising it, they paused to take breath and looked about them for assistance. At that moment a huge, broad-shouldered, black-haired, tawny-skinned fellow was seen to be elbowing his way along in a contrary direction to that in which the mob were pressing, and as he came, many of the people shouted noisy and derisive greetings. His great height made him conspicuous, for he towered above all the heads of the throng except that of the 'Nazarene'—and the long almond shape of his eyes, his dark skin and manner of dress bespoke him of a very different race to the elect of Judæa. As he

pushed through the press like a giant thrusting aside pigmies, some of the soldiers recognised him and shouted his name :

‘ Simon ! ’

‘ Come hither, Simon ! Lend thine aid ! Hast thou Rufus and Alexander with thee ? ’

‘ What news from Cyrene ? ’

‘ Thou art here in good time, Simon ! For once we shall find use for thee ! ’

Hearing these and sundry other vociferations, the black-browed Cyrenian paused and looked scornfully about him.

‘ What is this fool’s feast of howling ? ’ he demanded in an angry tone—‘ Are ye emptying Jerusalem of her thieves and rascals ? Then shall the city be left desolate ! Whither go ye ? ’ Then, as his fiery eyes roved over the throng and he caught sight of the fair face of the doomed Captive—‘ What enslaved Prince have ye there ? ’

Wild yells and execrations drowned his voice, and a considerable portion of the mob closed in and began to hustle him roughly.

‘ Art thou drunken with new wine that thou dost

see a prince in a malefactor? Thieves and rascals dost thou call us, thou dog !'

'Let him bear the Cross of the Nazarene !' shouted one of the roughs,—'He hath often boasted he hath the strength of four men !'

'Ay, ay ! Let him carry the Cross ! 'Tis fitting toil for a Cyrenian jack-ass such as he !'

And they continued to press round him with much hooting and swearing. The huge Simon was about to strike out with his fists and fight his way free of them all, when suddenly,—right across the heads of the multitude,—he met the straight, luminous, penetrating look of the Christ. Something shot through his veins like fire,—his strong limbs trembled,—a strange surprise and fear benumbed his mental faculties,—and he mechanically allowed himself to be pushed along to the spot where the bearers of the Cross still rested, taking breath, and wiping the sweat from their brows.

'Welcome, Simon !' said one of them with a grin, 'Thy broad back shall for once do us good service ! Where are thy sons ?'

'What need ye of them ?' growled Simon roughly

—‘Surely they have been in Jerusalem these many days.’

‘Rufus hath been wine-bibbing,’ piped a lad standing by,—‘And Alexander hath been seen oft at the money-changers!’

‘And thou art a prating infant,’ retorted Simon—‘Who gave thee leave to note the actions of grown men? In Cyrene thou would’st be whipped for opening thy mouth before thy betters.’

‘Callest thou thyself my betters!’ said the boy derisively,—‘Thou mud-skinned rascal! Take up the Cross and see thou stumble not!’

For one second Simon looked as though he were about to strike the lad to the earth,—but he was surrounded by the Jewish mob and the Roman soldiers, and there was the magnetic impression upon him of two splendid sorrowful Eyes that had, in one lightning glance, expressed a silent wish,—a dumb yet irresistible command;—and therefore he stood mute, displaying no resentment. Nor did he make the least attempt to resist when, with jeers and laughter, the soldiers lifted the great Cross and laid its entire unsupported weight upon his shoulders.

‘How likest thou that, thou giant of the mountain and the sea!’ screamed an excitable old woman in the crowd, shaking her wrinkled fist at him,—‘Wilt vaunt again of thy city set on a hill, and the vigour thou inhalest from thy tufts of pine? Shall we not hear thy sinews crack, thou ruffian of Cyrene, who doth dare to mock the children of Israel!’

But Simon replied not. He had settled the Cross steadily in position, and now, clasping its lower beam with both muscular arms, appeared to carry its massive weight with extraordinary and even pleasurable ease. The soldiers gathered round him in amaze,—such herculean vigour was something of a miracle,—and awakened their reluctant admiration. Petronius, the centurion, approached him.

‘Canst thou in very truth bear the Cross?’ he asked,—he was a mercifully-minded man, and of himself would neither have incited a mob to cruelty nor soldiers to outrage—‘’Tis some distance yet to Calvary,—wilt venture thus far?’

Simon lifted his black leonine head,—his eyes had grown soft and humid, and a faint smile trembled on his bearded lips.

‘I will venture with this burden to the end of the world!’ he answered, and there was a deep thrill of tenderness in his voice that made its roughness musical; ‘To me ’tis light as a reed newly plucked by the river! Waste no words concerning my strength or my body’s ableness,—lead on with yonder crowned Man—I follow!’

Petronius stared at him in undisguised wonderment, but said no more. And once again the multitude began to move, crushing onward like the troublous waves of a dark sea, all flowing in one direction, and illumined only by the golden beaconsplendour of that Divine Glory in their midst, the god-like visage, the steadfast eyes and radiant head of the ‘King of the Jews.’ And the tramping feet of the hurrying thousands awakened from the stones of the road a sullen continuous echo of thunder, as with shouts and shrieks and oaths and laughter they pressed forward, athirst for blood,—forward, and on to Calvary!

XI

THE sun now rode high in the heavens, and the scorching heat became almost unendurable. The morning's trial had begun earlier and lasted longer than in ordinary cases, owing to Pilate's indecision, and after the final pronouncement of the people's verdict, there had still been delays, so that time had worn on imperceptibly till it was past mid-day. The perfect blue of the sky was of such a deep and polished luminance that it suggested a dome of bright burning metal rather than air, from which the vertical light-rays darted, sharp as needles, plunging their hot points smartingly into the flesh. Jerusalem lay staring up at the brilliant glare, its low white houses looking almost brittle in the blistering flames of noon,—here and there tall palms shot up their slender brown stems and tufts of dusty green against

the glassy dazzle of the clear ether,—and, hanging over the roofs of some of the best-built dwellings, the large loose leaves of the fig-trees lolled lazily, spreading wide and displaying on their branches, ripe fruit ready to break into crimson pulp at a touch. Full in the blaze of the sunshine the splendid Temple of Solomon on Mount Moriah glistened like a huge jewel, its columns and porticoes defined with microscopical distinctness and clearly visible from every quarter of the city,—while at certain glimmering points of distance the monotonous outlines of buildings and street corners were relieved by the pink flush of cactus-flowers and the grey-green of olive-boughs. Over all the scene there brooded a threatening stillness as of pent-up thunder,—and this heavy calm of the upper air presented itself in singular opposition to the tumultuous roaring of the crowd below, whose savage irritability and impatience were sensibly increased by the parching dryness of the atmosphere. Pouring through the streets in a fever of excitement that rose higher with every onward step, the heat and fatigue of their march seemed to swell their fury rather than diminish it, and they bellowed like wild

beasts as they scrambled, pushed and tore along, each man ravenously eager to be among the first to arrive at the place of execution. And by and by, when the soldiers began to halt at various wine-shops on their way to quench the devouring thirst induced by the choking dust and the stifling weather, the multitude were not slow in following their example. Drink was purchased and passed about freely in cups and flagons, and its effect was soon seen. Disorderly groups of men and women began to dance and sing,—some pretended to preach,—others to prophesy,—one of the roughs offered a goblet of wine to Simon of Cyrene, and because he steadily refused it, dashed it violently on the Cross he carried. The red liquid trickled off the wood like blood, and the fellow who had cast it there, gave a tipsy yell of laughter.

‘Lo ’tis baptized!’ he cried to the applauding mob,—‘With a better baptism than that of headless John!’

His dissolute companions roared their appreciation of the jest, and the discordant hubbub grew more and more deafening. With that curious fickleness common to crowds, every one seemed to have for-

gotten Barabbas for whose release they had so recently and eagerly clamoured. They were evidently not aware of his presence among them,—probably they did not recognise him, clad as he was in sober and well-ordered apparel. He was in the thick of the press however, and watched the coarse half-drunken antics of those around him with a pained and meditative gravity. Occasionally his eyes grew restless and wandered over the heaving mass of people in troubled search, as though looking for something lost and incalculably precious. Melchior, always beside him, observed this and smiled somewhat satirically.

‘She is not there,’—he said—‘Thinkest thou she would mingle with this vulgar swarm? Nay, nay! She will come, even as the high-priests will come, by private by-ways,—perchance the excellent Caiaphas himself will bring her.’

‘Caiaphas!’ echoed Barabbas doubtfully—‘What knoweth she of Caiaphas?’

‘Much!’ replied Melchior. ‘His wife is one of her friends elect. Have I not told thee, thou simple-souled barbarian, to remember that thou hast been

lost to the world for eighteen months? To a woman 'tis an ample leisure wherein to work mischief! Nay be not wrathful!—'tis my alien way of speech, and I am willing to believe thy maiden a paragon of all the virtues till'——

'Till what?' demanded Barabbas suspiciously.

'Till it is proved otherwise!' said Melchior. 'And that she is beauteous is beyond all question,—and beauty is all that the soul of a man desireth. Nevertheless, as I told thee a while ago, 'twas her brother that betrayed the "Nazarene."'

'I marvel at it!' murmured Barabbas—'Judas was ever of an open candid nature.'

'Thou didst know him well?' questioned Melchior with one of his keen looks.

'Not well, but sufficiently'—and Barabbas flushed a shamed red as he spoke—'He was one of my fellow-workers in the house of Shadeen,—the merchant I told thee of'——

'The Persian dealer in pearls and gold?—Ah!' and Melchior smiled again,—'And, all to please the sister of this so candid Judas, thou didst steal jewels and wert caught in thy theft! Worthy Barabbas!

Methinks that for this Judith of thine, thou didst commit all thy sins !’

Barabbas lowered his eyes.

‘She craved for gems,’—he said, in the tone of one proffering suitable excuse,—‘And I took a necklet of pure pearls. They were suited to her maidenhood, and seemed to me better placed round her soft dove’s throat than in the musty coffer of Shadeen.’

‘Truly a notable reason for robbing thy employer ! And thy plea for the right to commit murder was equally simple,—Gabrias the Pharisee slandered the fair one, and thou with a knife-thrust didst silence his evil tongue ! So ! To speak honestly ’tis this Judith Iscariot is the cause of all thy sufferings and thy imprisonment and yet—thou lovest her !’

‘If thou hast seen her’—murmured Barabbas with a sigh.

‘I have !’ returned Melchior tranquilly—‘She is willing to be seen ! Is she not the unrivalled beauty of the city, and wherefore should she be chary of her charms ? They will not last for ever ; best flourish them abroad while yet they are fresh and fair !’

Nevertheless they have made of thee both thief and murderer.'

Barabbas did not attempt to contradict the truth of this pitiless statement.

'And if all were known'—pursued Melchior,—'the sedition in which thou wert concerned perchance arose from her persuasion?'

'No, no!' averred Barabbas quickly—'There were many reasons. We are under tyranny; not so much from Rome as from our own people who assist to make the laws. The priests and the Pharisees rule us, and many are the abuses of authority. The poor are oppressed,—the wronged are never righted. Now I have read many a Greek and Roman scroll,—and have even striven to study somewhat of the wisdom of the Egyptians, and I have the gifts of memory and ready speech, so that I can, if needful, address a multitude. I fell in with some of the disaffected, and gave them my service in their cause,—I know not how it chanced,—but surely there is a craving for freedom in the breast of every man?—and we,—we are not free.'

'Patience! ye shall have wondrous liberty ere long!' said Melchior, a dark look flashing from his eyes—

‘For the time is coming when the children of Israel shall rule the land with rods of iron! The chink of coin shall be the voice of their authority, and yonder thorn-crowned Spirit will have lived on earth in vain for those who love gold more than life. The triumph of the Jews is yet to be! Long have they been the captive and the conquered,—but they shall make captives in their turn, and conquer the mightiest kings. By fraud, by falsehood, by cunning, by worldly-wisdom, by usury, by every poisoned arrow in Satan’s quiver they shall rule! Even thy name, Barabbas, shall serve them as a leading title; ’tis *thou* shalt be “King of the Jews” as far as this world holds,—for He who goeth before us is King of a wider nation—a nation of immortal spirits over whom gold has no power!’

Barabbas gazed at him in awe, understanding little of what he meant, but chilled by the stern tone of his voice, which seemed to have within it a jarring note of menace and warning.

‘What nation dost thou speak of’—he murmured,—
What world’——

‘What world?’ repeated Melchior,—‘No single world,

but a thousand million worlds! There, far above us'—and he pointed to the dazzling sky, 'is the azure veil which hides their courses and muffles their music,—but they are existent facts, not dreamer's fancies,—huge spheres, vast systems, sweeping onward in their appointed ways, rich with melody, brimming with life, rounded with light, and yonder Man of despised Nazareth, walking to His death, knows the secrets of them all!'

Stricken with a sudden terror, Barabbas stopped abruptly and caught the impassioned speaker by the arm.

'What sayest thou?' he gasped—'Art thou mad? Or hast thou too, beheld the Vision? For I have thought strange and fearful things since I looked upon His face and saw— Nay, good Melchior, why should this crime be visited upon Judæa? Let me harangue the people,—perchance it is not yet too late for rescue!'

'Rescue!' echoed Melchior—'Rescue a lamb from wolves,—a fawn from tigers,—or more difficult still a Faith from priestcraft! Let be, thou rash son of blinded passion, let be! What is designed must be accomplished.'

He was silent for a little space, and seemed absorbed in thought. Barabbas walked beside him, silent too, but full of an inexplicable horror and fear. The surging mob howled and screamed around them,—their ears were for the moment deaf to outer things. Presently Melchior looked up and the amber gleam in his eyes glittered strangely, as he said—

‘And Judas,—Judas Iscariot, thou sayest, was of a simple nature?’

‘He seemed so when I knew him’—answered Barabbas with an effort, for his thoughts were in a tangle of distress and perplexity—‘He was notable for truth and conscientiousness,—he was much trusted; he kept the books of Shadeen. At times he had wild notions of reform,—he resented tyranny, and loathed the priests. Yea, so much did he loathe them that he never would have entered the synagogue, had it not been to please his father, and more specially Judith, his only sister whom he loved. So much he once told me. One day he left the city in haste and secrecy,—none knew whither he went,—and after that’——

‘After that thou didst steal Shadeen’s pearls for thy love and slay thy love’s slanderer,’—finished his companion serenely, ‘and thou wert plunged in prison for thy follies ; and narrowly hast thou escaped being crucified this day.’

Barabbas looked up, his black eyes firing with a sudden ardour.

‘I would have died willingly to save yon kingly Man!’ he said impulsively.

Melchior regarded him steadily, and his own eyes softened.

‘Breaker of the law, thief and murderer as thou art convicted of being,’ he said, ‘thou hast something noble in thy nature after all ! May it count to thy good hereafter ! And of Judas I can tell thee somewhat. When he departed secretly from Jerusalem, he journeyed to the borders of the Sea of Galilee, and there did join himself in company with the Prophet of Nazareth and His other disciples. He wandered with Him throughout the land,—I myself saw him near Capernaum, and he was ever foremost in service to his Master. Now, here in Jerusalem last night, he gave Him up to the guard,—and lo, the name of

"Judas" from henceforth will stand for "traitor" to the end of time !'

Barabbas shuddered, though he could not have told why.

'Doth Judith know of this?' he asked.

A fleeting cold smile hovered on Melchior's lips.

'Judith knoweth much,—but not all. She hath not seen her brother since yesterday at sundown.'

'Then, hath he fled the city?'

Melchior looked at him strangely for a moment. Then he answered—

'Yea, he hath fled.'

'And those others who followed the Nazarene,' inquired Barabbas eagerly—'Where are they?'

'They have fled also'—returned Melchior. 'What else should they do? Is it not natural and human to forsake the fallen?'

'They are cowards all!' exclaimed Barabbas hotly.

'Nay!' replied Melchior—'They are—men!'

And noting his companion's pained expression he added,—

'Knowest thou not that cowards and men are

one and the same thing, most excellent Barabbas? Didst ever philosophise? If not, why didst thou read Greek and Roman scrolls and puzzle thy brain with the subtle wisdom of Egypt? No man was ever persistently heroic, in small matters as well as great,—and famous deeds are ever done on impulse. Study thyself,—note thine own height and breadth,—thou hast so much bone and muscle and sinew,—’tis a goodly frame, well knit together, and to all intents and purposes thou art Man. Nevertheless a glance from a woman’s eyes, a smile on a woman’s mouth, a word of persuasion or suggestion from a woman’s tongue, can make thee steal and commit murder. Wherefore thou, Man, art also Coward. Too proud to rob, too merciful to slay,—this would be courage, and more than is in man. For men are pigmies,—they scuttle away in droves before a storm or the tremor of an earthquake,—they are afraid for their lives. And what *are* their lives? The lives of motes in a sunbeam,—of gnats in a mist of miasma,—nothing more. And they will never be anything more, till they learn how to make them valuable. And that lesson will never be mastered save by the few.’

Barabbas sighed.

‘Verily thou dost love to repeat the tale of my sins’—he said—‘Maybe thou dost think I cannot hear it too often. And now thou callest me coward! yet I may not be angered with thee, seeing thou art a stranger, and I, despite the law’s release, am still no more than a criminal,—wherefore, because thou seemest wise and of singular powers, I forbear with thy reproaches. But ’tis not too late to learn the lesson thou dost speak of, and methinks even I may make my recovered life of value!’

‘Truly thou mayest’—responded Melchior—‘For if thou so dost choose, not all the powers of heaven and earth can hinder thee. But ’tis a business none can guide thee in. Life is a talisman, dropped freely into thy bosom, but the fitting use of the magic gift must be discovered by thyself alone.’

At that moment the moving crowd came to a sudden abrupt halt. Loud cries and exclamations were heard.

‘He will die ere he is crucified!’

‘Lo! he faints by the way!’

‘If he can walk no more, bind him with ropes and drag him to Calvary!’

‘Bid Simon carry him as well as the Cross!’

‘Support him, ye lazy ruffians!’ cried a woman in the crowd,—‘Will ye have Cæsar told that the Jews are nothing but barbarians?’

The clamour grew louder, and the excited mob rolled back upon itself with a force that was dangerous to life and limb. People fell and were trampled or bruised, — children screamed; and for a few moments the confusion was terrific.

‘Now would be the time to attempt a rescue!’ muttered Barabbas, with some excitement, clenching his fists as though in eagerness to begin the fray.

Melchior laid a restraining hand on his arm.

‘As well try to pluck the sun out of heaven!’ he said passionately—‘Control thyself, rash fool! Thou canst not rescue One for whom death is the divine fulness of life! Press forward with me quickly,—and we shall discover the cause of this new delay,—but say no word, and raise not a hand in opposition to Destiny. Wait till the end!’

XII.

WITH these words, and still holding Barabbas firmly by the arm, he plunged into the thickest part of the crowd, which appeared to yield and give mysterious way to his passage,—and presently reached a place of standing-room where it was possible to see what had occasioned the halt and uproar. All the noise and fury surged round the grand figure of the ‘Nazarene,’ who stood erect as ever, but nevertheless seemed even in that upright position to have suddenly lost consciousness. His face had an unearthly pallor and His eyes were closed,—and it appeared to the soldiers and people as if Death had laid a merciful hand upon Him ere there was time to torture His life. In response to sundry calls and shouts for water, or some other cool beverage to rouse the apparently swooning Captive, a man came

out of the dark interior of his dwelling with a goblet containing wine mingled with myrrh, and handed it to the centurion in charge. Petronius, with a strange sinking at the heart and something of remorse and pity, advanced and lifted it to the lips of the Divine Sufferer, who as the cold rim of the cup touched Him, opened His starry eyes and smiled. The infinite beauty of that smile and its pathetic tenderness,—the vast pardon and sublime patience it expressed, seemed all at once to flash a sudden mysterious light of comprehension into the hearts of the cruel multitude, for, as if struck by a spell, their cries and murmurings ceased, and every head was turned towards the great Radiance which shone upon them with such intense and undefinable glory. Petronius staggered back, chilled with a vague horror,—he returned the cup of wine and myrrh to the man who had offered it,—the ‘Nazarene’ had not tasted it,—He had merely expressed His silent acknowledgment by that luminous and exquisite smile. And strangely awful did it suddenly seem to the bluff centurion that such an One as He should express gratitude to any man, even by a glance,—though why it appeared

unnatural, he, Petronius, could not tell. Meanwhile, some of the women pressing closer and gazing full into the calm fair face of the Condemned, were touched into awe and admiration, and began to utter exclamations of regret and compassion,—others, more emotional, and encouraged by at last hearing an unmistakable murmur of sympathy ripple wave-like through the throng, broke into loud weeping, and beat their breasts with frenzied gesticulations of mourning and despair.

‘They will change their minds, these Jews,’—said one of the soldiers sullenly, aside to Petronius—‘With all these wailings and halts by the way, our work will never be done. Best press on quickly.’

‘Hold thy peace!’ retorted Petronius angrily—‘Seest thou not the Man faints with fatigue and maybe with the pain of the scourging? Let him pause a while.’

But He of whom they spoke had already recovered Himself. His lips parted a little,—they trembled and were dewy, as though some heavenly restorative had just touched them. The faint colour flowed back to His face, and He looked dreamily about Him, like

a strayed Angel who scarcely recognises the sphere into which it has wandered. The weeping women gathered near Him timidly, some carrying infants in their arms, and, undeterred by the frowns of the soldiers, ventured to touch His garments. One young matron, a woman of Rome, lifted a small fair-haired nursling close up to Him that He might look at it,—the little one stretched out its dimpled arms and tried to clutch first the crown of thorns, and then the glittering golden hair. The sweet encouragement and strong tenderness of expression with which the Divine Immortal met the child's laughing eyes and innocently attempted caresses, melted the mother's heart, and she gave way to uncontrollable sobbing, clasping her loved and lovely treasure close, and letting her tears rain on its nestling head. The other women round her, sympathetically infected by her example, renewed their lamentations with such hysterical passion that presently the gradual mutterings of impatience and discontent that had for some minutes proceeded from the male portion of the crowd, swelled into loud remonstrance and indignation.

‘What fools are women!’ ‘Press forward!’ ‘We

shall have these whimpering souls preventing the law's fulfilment !' 'Why delay thus ?'

But these angry outcries were of little avail, and the women still wept and clustered about the 'Nazarene,' till He Himself turned His eyes upon them with a look of love and invincible command which like a charm suddenly hushed their clamour. At the same moment, a low voice, rendered faint with weariness, dropped on their ears melodiously like a sweet and infinitely sad song :

'Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children !' Here a deep sigh interrupted speech ; then the mellow accents gathered strength and solemnity : *'For behold the days are coming in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the breasts which never gave suck. Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us ! and to the hills, Cover us !'*

The rich voice faltered for a moment, and the beautiful eyes of the captive 'King' filled with a deep meditative pity as He added ;—*'For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry ?'*

The listening women looked up at Him in tearful astonishment, quieted, yet understanding nothing of His words. The last sentence seemed to them particularly vague and meaningless,—they could not comprehend that He who thus spoke to them was thinking of the whole world merely as '*a green tree*' or a planet in its prime, and that He foresaw little but sorrow from the wilful disbelief and disobedience of its inhabitants when it should become old and like the sapless tree, '*dry*.' Dry of faith, dry of love, dry of all sweet, pure, holy and unselfish emotion,—a mere withered husk of a world ready to be scattered among the star-dust of the Universe, having failed to obey its Maker's will, or to accomplish its nobler destiny. Such premonitory signs are given to thinkers and philosophers alone,—the majority of men have no time and less inclination to note or accept them. There is time to eat, time to steal, time to lie, time to murder, time to become a degradation to the very name of Man;—but there is no time to pause and consider that after all our petty labours and selfish ambitions, this star on which we live belongs, not to us, but to God, and that if He but willed it so,

it could be blotted out of space in a second and never be missed, save perhaps for the one singular distinction that the Divine Christ dwelling upon it from birth to death, has made it sacred.

None among the Jewish populace that morning were able to imagine the vast wonder and mystery investing the sublime Figure which moved amongst them with such tranquil dignity and resignation,—none could foresee the tremendous results which were destined to spring from the mere fact of His existence upon earth. All that they saw was a Man of extraordinary physical beauty, who for bold and open teaching of new doctrines pronounced by the priests to be blasphemous, was being led to His death. Thrust violently back by the guards, the frightened group of women who had wept for His sufferings, got scattered among the crowd, and, drifting hither and thither like blown leaves in a storm, forgot their tears in their anxiety to protect their children from the reckless pushing and buffeting of the onward swarming rabble. The disorder was increased by the terrified starting and plunging of horses and mules that got entangled in the crowd during the progress

of the procession through the narrow and tortuous streets,—but at last one sharp turn in the road brought them in full view of Calvary. The people set up a wild unanimous shout,—and Simon of Cyrene carrying the Cross looked up startled and pained by the discordant roar. For he had been lost in a dream. Unconscious of the weight he bore, he had seemed to himself to walk on air. He had spoken no word, though many around him had mocked him and striven to provoke him by insolent jests and jeers,—he was afraid to utter a sound lest he should disturb and dispel the strange and delicious emotion he experienced,—emotion which he could not explain, but which kept him in a state of bewildered wonderment and ecstasy. There was music everywhere about him,—high above the mutterings and murmurings of the populace, he heard mysterious throbs of melody as of harps struck by the air,—the hard stones of the road were soft as velvet to his sandalled feet,—the Cross he carried seemed scented with the myrtle and the rose,—and there was no more weight in it than in a gathered palm-leaf plucked as a symbol of victory. He remembered how in his youth he had once carried

the baby son of a king on his shoulders down one of the Cyrenian hills to the edge of the sea,—and the child, pleased with the swiftness and ease of its journey, had waved aloft a branch of vine in sign of triumph and joy. The burden of the Cross was no heavier than that of the laughing child and tossing vine! But now,—now the blissful journey must end,—the rude cries of the savage multitude aroused him from his reverie,—the harp-like melodies around him rippled away into minor echoes of deep sadness,—and as his eyes beheld the hill of Calvary, he, for the first time since he began his march, felt weary unto death. He had never in all his years of life known such happiness as while carrying the Cross of Him who was soon to be nailed upon it; but now the time had come when he must lay it down, and take up the far more weighty burdens of the world and its low material claims. Why not die here, he thought vaguely, with the Man whose radiant head gleamed before him like the sun in heaven? Surely it would be well, since here, at Calvary, life seemed to have a sweet and fitting end! He was only a barbarian, uninstructed and ignorant of heavenly things,—he

could not analyse what he felt or reason out his unfamiliar sensations, but some singular change had been wrought in him, since he lifted up the Cross,—thus much he knew,—thus much he realised ;—the rest was mere wonder and worship.

As the multitude poured itself towards the place of execution, a party of horsemen dashed through a side-street and careered up the hill at full gallop, the hoofs of their spirited steeds tearing up and scattering morsels of the sun-baked turf like dust in the air as they passed. They were Roman nobles, visitors to Jerusalem, who hearing of what was about to take place, had come out to see this singular Jewish festival of blood. After them followed another group of persons, on foot, and glittering in raiment of various costly hues,—these were Caiaphas, Annas and many of the members of the Sanhedrim, accompanied by a select number of the retinue of their various households. Meanwhile Barabbas was being guarded and guided forward by the astute Melchior, who with wonderful dexterity and composure, piloted him through the thickest of the crush and brought him to a clear space at the foot of the hill. Just as they

reached the spot, several richly-attired women, some of them veiled, came out of the shady avenues of a private garden close by and began the ascent at a slow and sauntering pace. They were laughing and talking gaily among themselves; one of them, the tallest, walked with a distinctive air of haughtiness and a swaying suppleness of movement,—she had a brilliant flame-coloured mantle thrown over her head and shoulders.

‘Lo there!’ whispered Melchior, grasping Barabbas firmly by the arm to keep him prisoner—‘Yonder she goes! Seest thou not yon poppy-hued gala garb? ’Tis the silken sheath of the flower whose perfume drives thee mad!—the dove-like desirer of stolen pearls!—the purest and fairest virgin in Judæa, Judith Iscariot!’

With a fierce cry and fiercer oath, Barabbas strove to wrench himself from his companion’s hold.

‘Release me!’ he gasped—‘Detain me not thus, or by my soul, I will slay thee!’

His efforts were in vain; Melchior’s hand, though light, was firm as iron and never yielded, and Melchior’s eyes, flashing fire, yet cold as ice in

expression, rested on the heated angry face of the man beside him, unswervingly and with a chill disdain.

'Thou infatuated fool!' he said slowly—'Thou misguided barbarian! *Thou wilt slay me?* "By thy soul" thou wilt? Swear not by thy soul, good ruffian, for thou hast one, strange as it doth seem! 'Tis the only positive thing about thee, wherefore take not its name in vain, else it may visit vengeance on thee! Judgest thou me as easy to kill as a Pharisee? Thou art in serious error! The steel of thy knife would melt in my flesh,—thy hands would fall withered and benumbed didst thou presume to lay them violently upon me! Be warned in time, and pervert not my friendship, for believe me thou wilt need it presently.'

Barabbas looked at him in wild appeal,—a frozen weight seemed to have fallen on his heart, and a sense of being mastered and compelled, vexed his impatient spirit. But he was powerless,—he had, on a mere sudden impulse, put himself, he knew not why, under the control of this stranger,—he had only himself to blame if now his own will seemed paralysed and impotent. He ceased struggling, and cast a longing

glance after the flame-coloured mantle that now appeared to be floating lightly up the hill of Calvary like a stray cactus-petal on the air.

‘Thou knowest not,’ he muttered—‘thou canst not know how I have hungered for her face’——

‘And thou shalt feed on it ere long’—rejoined Melchior sarcastically,—‘And may it quell thy vulgar appetite! But assume at least the appearance of a man,—betray not thyself before her maidens,—they will but scoff at thee. Moreover, bethink thee thou art here as witness of a death,—a death far greater than all love!’

Barabbas sighed, and his head drooped dejectedly on his breast. His strong harsh features were convulsed with passion,—but the strange force exercised over him by his companion was too subtle for resistance. Melchior watched him keenly for a moment ere he spoke again,—then he said more gently, but with earnestness and solemnity—

‘Lo, they ascend Calvary! Seest thou not the Condemned and His guards are already half way up the hill? Come, let us follow;—thou shalt behold the world agonised and the sun fade in heaven!—

thou shalt hear the conscious thunder roar out wrath at this symbolic slaughter of the Divine in Man! No worse murder was ever wrought,—none more truly representative of humanity!—and from henceforth the earth rolls on its appointed way in a mist of blood,—saved, may be, but stained!—stained and marked with the Cross,—for ever!’

XIII

BARABBAS trembled as he heard. Full of apprehensive trouble and dreary foreboding, he followed his inscrutable new acquaintance. Some strange inward instinct told him that there was a terrible truth in Melchior's words,—though why a stranger and alien to Judæa should know more concerning the mystic 'Nazarene' than the Jews themselves was a problem he could not fathom. Nevertheless he began the brief ascent of Calvary with a sinking heart, and a sensation that was very like despair. He felt that something tremendous and almost incomprehensible was about to be consummated, and that on the children of Israel for evermore would rest the curse invoked by themselves. Could God Himself alter the deliberately self-chosen fate of a man or a nation? No! Even

the depraved and ill-taught Barabbas was mentally conscious of the awful yet divine immutability of Free-will.

The dry turf crackled beneath the tread as though it were on fire, for the heat was more than ever overpoweringly intense. Time had worn on till it was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon, and the broad unshadowed glare of the sun streamed pitilessly down upon the hill of execution, which now presented the appearance of a huge hive covered thickly with thousands of swarming, buzzing bees. The crowd had broken up on all sides, each section of it striving to attain the best point of view from whence to watch the progress of the dire tragedy about to be enacted. The fatal eminence sloped upward very gently, and on cooler days the climb would have scarcely been perceptible, but at this fierce hour, when all the world seemed staring and aflame with wonder, the way appeared difficult and long. Melchior and Barabbas however, walking side by side, managed to keep up a moderately swift and even pace, despite the vindictive blaze and dazzle of the sky, and never paused to take breath till, as they

neared the summit, they came upon a little group of women surrounding the unconscious form of one of their companions. Barabbas, with a wild idea that his Judith might be amongst them, sprang eagerly forward, and this time Melchior let him go. But he was quickly disappointed,—no silken-robed beauty was there,—they were all poor, footsore, sad-faced, ill-clad creatures, some of whom were silently weeping, while only one of them, who seemed, by her singular dignity of bearing, to be of a higher rank, stood apart,—but she was closely veiled, so that her features were not visible. Their whole attention was centred on the woman who had swooned, and she appeared, from her exterior condition, to be the poorest of them all. Clothed only in a rough garment of coarse grey linen bound under her bosom with a hempen girdle, she lay on the ground where she had suddenly fallen, like one newly dead, — and the piteous still loveliness of her was such, that Barabbas, though his wild soul mirrored another and far more brilliant face, could not help but be moved to compassion, as he bent forward and saw her thus prone and senseless. The chief glory that distinguished

her was her hair,—it had come unbound, and rippled about her in lavish waves of warm yet pale gold,—her features were softly rounded and delicate like those of a child, and the thick lashes that fringed the closed eyes, being more darkly tinted than the hair, cast a shadow beneath, suggestive of pain and the shedding of many tears.

‘What aileth her?’ asked Barabbas gently.

One or two of the women eyed him doubtfully but offered no reply. Melchior had approached to within a certain distance of the group, and there he waited. Barabbas beckoned him, but seeing he did not stir, went hastily up to him.

‘Shall we not be of some service here?’ he demanded—‘’Tis a wondrous fair virgin whom sorrow or pain hath surely overcome.’

‘Do as it seemeth unto thee well,’—responded Melchior quietly, looking him full in the face as he spoke; ‘nevertheless thou must be advised in this matter. Yon “wondrous fair virgin,” as thou callest her, is but a woman of ill-fame,—a golden-haired wanton of the city ways, called Mary Magdalene.’

Barabbas started as if he had been stung. A dark frown gathered on his brows.

‘Mary Magdalene!’ he muttered—‘Of a truth she is a sinner! I have heard sundry evil things of her,—yet of myself I would not be merciless,—I could not stone a woman, . . . but if to-day I see and speak with Judith’——

‘Enough!’ interrupted Melchior disdainfully—‘I understand thee! Thou would’st not sully thyself, good thief, with even so much as a look from a wanton, Judith being pure as heaven and Mary black as hell! Leave her where she lies, O thou moralising murderer,—thou true type of the men who make such women!—leave her to the ministrations of her own sex. She whom thou, assassin, dost scorn, hath been brought to penitence and pardoned by Him who dieth presently, yet what of that? ’Tis naught, ’tis naught!—for He must be crucified, but *thou* canst live!—O wondrous world that thus pronounceth equity! Come, let us onward!’

Barabbas listened, sullenly ashamed.

‘If she be penitent ’tis well’—he muttered—‘but why then goest thou not thyself to her?’

A sudden gravity clouded the ironical glitter in Melchior's eyes.

'Why?' he echoed pensively,—then after a pause, 'Were I to tell thee truly why, thou would'st learn more than is yet fitting to thy nature. Let it suffice to thee to know that among those women there is One, whom I may not venture to approach save in worship,—for where she treads is holy ground! For her sake from henceforth, Woman is made Queen!—nay, look not thus strangely!—thou shalt hear more of this anon.'

He resumed his walk sedately, and Barabbas more and more troubled and perplexed, gave a disquieted glance backward over his shoulder at the group now left behind. He saw that the fainting Magdalene had revived sufficiently to be lifted partially to her feet,—and he caught the flash of the dazzling sunlight on the falling masses of her luxuriant hair. Then he turned his eyes away, and bent his looks downward to the ground, and a silence fell between him and Melchior. All at once a shriek of agony tore the air into sharp echoes, followed by another and yet another. Barabbas stopped, his blood freez-

ing at the hideous outcry. Unable to speak, he gazed at his companion in affrighted inquiry.

‘’Tis the first taste of pain such as thou mightest this day and at this moment have suffered,’ said Melchior, answering his look—‘They are nailing down two thieves. Hearest thou not the clang of the hammers? A few paces more and we shall see the work.’

They quickened their steps, and in a couple of minutes reached the summit of the hill. There they found themselves in full view of the terrible scene of execution,—a pageant of such tremendous import, such sublime horror, that the imagination of man can scarcely grasp it,—scarcely realise the consummate bitterness of the awful and immortal tragedy. The multitude had formed into a complete ring, circling unbrokenly round the crest of Calvary,—while the soldiery had divided into two lines, one keeping to the right, the other to the left. At a signal from the centurion, Simon of Cyrene laid down with tender and lingering reluctance the great Cross he had so lightly carried,—and as he did so, the Man of Nazareth, moving tranquilly to the spot indicated

to Him by His guards, took up His position beside the intended instrument of His death, and there waited patiently for the accomplishment of His fate. The executioners were already busily occupied with part of their dreadful task,—for, at the crafty suggestion of Caiaphas, the two thieves who had been brought out from the prison that morning were nailed on their respective crosses first. This was to satisfy the refined cruelty of the Jewish priests, who by this means sought to overpower the ‘Nazarene’ with terror, by forcing Him to witness the agonies of those who were destined to suffer in His sacred company. But herein the bloodthirsty chiefs of the Sanhedrim were doomed to disappointment. No shadow of fear blanched the serene visage of the Divine,—not a tremor of horror or anxiety quivered through that stately frame of heroic stature and perfect mould. He stood erect, as a king of a thousand worlds might stand, conscious of power and glory,—His tall white-robed figure was fully outlined against the burning sky, and seemed to have gathered from the sun-rays a dazzling luminance of its own,—every prickly point in His crown of thorns glistened as with drops of

dew,—His fair calm face shone with a beauty not of mortals,—and so lightly did His sandalled feet seem poised on the hot and arid soil beneath Him, that He scarcely appeared to touch the earth more than a sunlit cloud may do ere rising again into its native ether. The land, the sky, the air, the sun, all seemed to be a part of Himself and to share mysteriously in the knowledge of His presence; had He spoken one word,—one word of thunderous command, it would have shaken the Universe! But with that inward force known only to God and the angels, He held His peace,—and His radiant eyes in their poetic wistfulness and wonder, seemed saying silently—‘I go to lift the curtain from this Death, which all My foolish creatures fear! I pass through torturing pain to give weak human nature courage! And I descend into the grave as Man, to prove that Man, though seeming dead, shall rise to life again!’

Meanwhile the shrieks and cries that had startled Barabbas were growing louder and wilder. They all proceeded from one of the doomed thieves,—the other was silent. With a mingling of morbid curiosity and nervous dread, Barabbas went shrinkingly

towards the spot where the executioners were at work, and gazing at the distorted features of the struggling criminal gave an irrepressible cry of amazement.

‘Hanan!’

Hanan indeed it was, his former fellow-prisoner, with whom he had fought through iron bars the previous night, and whom he had left yelling after him that very morning. Hearing Barabbas speak his name, the wretched man turned his protruding eyes round with a hideous expression of rage and envy.

‘*Thou*,—Barabbas! *Thou*,—free? Dog! Accursed devil! What evil conspiracy hast thou worked in to get thyself released and me condemned? Through thee I sinned!—through thee have I come to this! Coward! I spit on thee! Justice!—I will have justice! Thou lying hypocrite! Didst thou not swear to stand by thy friends? Let be, ye brutes!’ and with a yell he tore his arm away from the men who had seized it to nail it against the left-hand beam of the cross on which he was stretched—‘Thou, thou Barabbas, art thief as well as I—thou art worse

than I, for thou art murderer! Come thou hither and be tormented in my stead! This morning thou didst leave me in my cell starved and athirst,—and lo, they came and brought me forth to die,—while thou art here, pranked out in soft attire, free—free! Thou ruffian! And this is Rome's justice for the Jews! Ah!'—and he screamed furiously, as two or three soldiers beckoned forward by the executioners came and by force tied his arms with strong rope to the cross-beams of the instrument of death, while the great sharp nails were driven remorselessly through the centre of his palms,—‘Take ye Barabbas and crucify him!’ he yelled,—‘He murdered Gabrias,—he stole the jewels of Shadeen,—he it is who stirreth up sedition in the city,—bring out another cross for Barabbas!—let Barabbas die’——

Blood sprang to his mouth, choking his utterance,—his face grew dusky purple with agony and suffocation. The soldiers laughed.

‘Thou cowardly dog!’ said one of them—‘Die like a man, if there be any manhood in a Jew. A Roman would scorn to make such outcry. As for Barabbas, he is set free by law and pardoned.’

Hanan heard, and his eyes rolled horribly with a delirious glare.

‘Pardoned—pardoned!’ he muttered thickly—
‘May all the curses of deepest hell be on thee and thy wanton’——

But his sentence was left unfinished, for at that moment his cross was raised and set upright in the socket prepared for it in the ground,—and the blistering sun blazed down upon his bare head and naked body like an opened furnace-fire. He twisted and writhed in vain,—in his indescribable torture he would have torn his hands from the nails which pierced them, had they not been too tightly bound for such an effort. Most awful it was to look upon him hanging thus, with the anguished blood blackening in his veins and swelling his straining muscles,—and Barabbas turned away his eyes, sick and shuddering.

‘Do they all suffer like that?’ he asked of Melchior falteringly.

‘All who are made of clay and clay only, suffer thus’—responded Melchior, eyeing the tormented criminal with an air of scientific coldness,—‘He has

had his chance in this world and lost it. None but himself can be blamed for his present condition.'

'Wilt thou apply such moralising to the Nazarene?' demanded Barabbas half indignantly.

Melchior lifted his eyes for an instant to the sky as though he saw some wonder there.

'Ay! Even to the Nazarene!' he said softly—
'He also hath had His Way, and chosen His condition,—and unto Him be the glory hereafter! Time is His slave,—and Destiny His footstool, and His Cross the safety of Humanity!'

'Nay, if such be thy thought of Him'—murmured Barabbas, shaken to his very soul by a trembling awe he could not explain, 'were it not well to speak with Him ere He dies?—to crave a blessing'——

'His blessing is not for me, but all'—interrupted Melchior with solemnity—'And I have spoken with Him,—long ago, when His life on earth was young. But now, 'tis not a time for words,—'tis a time for vigilance and prayer;—watch thou therefore with me, and hold thy peace,—this is but the beginning of wonders.'

Just then the executioners finished nailing the

second thief to his cross. This man made no resistance and scarce an outcry. Once only, as his feet were pierced by the huge nail that was roughly hammered through them, he gave vent to an irresistible faint shriek of pain,—but afterwards, with an almost superhuman effort he controlled himself, and only moaned a little now and then. His eyes turned constantly towards the 'Nazarene'—and he seemed to derive ease and satisfaction from merely looking in that direction. There was much renewed excitement and stir among the thronging people as they saw the second cross about to be set up, for they judged that but little time would now elapse before the crowning act of the appalling drama,—the crucifixion of Him whom they accused of blasphemy because 'He made Himself the Son of God.' And in the restless surging to and fro of the mob, Barabbas suddenly spied standing somewhat apart, a knot of women whose costly raiment, adorned with jewels, bespoke them of higher wealth and rank than ordinary,—and among them one dazzlingly fair face shone forth like a star amid flame, for the hair which clustered above it was of a red-gold lustre, and the mantle flung about it

had the glowing tint of fire. One devouring eager look, and Barabbas, forgetting all fear, warning, or prophecy, fled like a madman towards that flashing danger-signal of a beauty that seemed to burn the very air encompassing it,—and with wild eyes, outstretched hands and breathless utterance he cried,—

‘Judith!’

XIV

SHE whom he thus called upon turned towards him as he came with a haughty air of offence and inquiry,—and the marvellous loveliness of her as she fully confronted him, checked his impetuous haste and held him, as it had often done before, tongue-tied, bewildered and unmanned. Nothing more beautiful in the shape of woman could be imagined than she,—her fairness was of that rare and subtle type which in all ages has overwhelmed reason, blinded judgment, and played havoc with the passions of men. Well did she know her own surpassing charm,—and thoroughly did she estimate the value of her fatal power to lure and rouse and torture all whom she made the victims of her almost resistless attraction. She was Judith Iscariot,—only daughter of one of the strictest and most respected

members of the Pharisaical sect in Jerusalem,—and by birth and breeding she should have been the most sanctimonious and reserved of maidens,—but in her case, nature had outstepped education. Nature, in a picturesque mood, had done wondrous things for her,—things that in the ordinary opinion of mankind, generally outweigh virtue and the cleanness of the soul in the sight of Heaven. To Nature therefore the blame was due, for having cast the red glow of a stormy sunset into the bronze-gold of her hair,—for having melted the blackness of night and the fire of stars together and set their mingled darkness and dazzle floating liquidly in her eyes,—for having bruised the crimson heart of the pomegranate-buds and made her lips the colour of the perfect flower,—and for having taken the delicate cream and pink of early almond blossoms and fixed this soft flushing of the Spring's life-blood in the colouring of her radiant face. Small cause for wonder was there in the fact that her beauty conquered all who came within its radius ;—even her rigid father himself grew lax, weak and without authority as far as she was concerned, and blinded by the excess of his parental

pride in her perfections, had gradually become the merest tool in her hands. How then could Barabbas, the criminal Barabbas, feel himself other than the most abject of slaves in such a dazzling presence! A beaten hound, a chidden child were firmer of resolution than he, when the chill yet lustrous glance he loved fell on him like a star-beam flashing from a frosty sky and set his strong nerves trembling.

‘Judith!’ he exclaimed again,—and then stopped, discouraged, for her large eyes, cold as the inner silence of the sea, surveyed him freezingly as though he were some insolently obtrusive stranger.

‘Judith!’ he faltered appealingly—‘Surely thou dost know me,—me, Barabbas?’

A sudden light of comprehension swept away the proud annoyance of her look,—her red lips parted a little, showing the even small white teeth within,—then a glimmer of amusement illumined her features, wakening dimples at the curves of her mouth and lifting the delicately pencilled corners of her eyebrows,—then she broke into a soft peal of careless, vibrating laughter.

‘Thou, Barabbas?’ she said, and laughed once

more,—‘Thou? Nay, ’tis not possible! Barabbas was of late in prison, and of a truth he could not steal from thence such purple raiment and solemnly sedate expression as thou wearest! Thou canst not be Barabbas,—for scarce two hours ago I saw him standing before Pilate, unclad, and foul as wolves and leopards are!—yet verily he seemed a nobler man than thou!’

Again she gave vent to her silvery mocking mirth, and her eyes flung him a glittering challenge of disdain and scorn. He, however, had recovered partial control of his emotions, and met her taunting gaze steadfastly and with something of sadness,—his dark face had grown very pale,—and all the warmth and rapture had died out of his voice when he spoke again.

‘I am Barabbas’—he repeated quietly—‘And thou, Judith, dost know it. Have I not suffered for thy sake?—and wilt thou still mock at me?’

She glanced him up and down with an air of mingled derision and pity.

‘I do not mock at thee, fool!—thou drest! How darest thou say thou hast suffered for my sake?’

I will have thee scourged for thy presumption! What has the daughter of Iscariot to do with thee, thou malefactor? Thou dost forget thy crimes too easily!’

‘Judith!’ he muttered, his pale features growing paler, and his hands clenching themselves in an involuntary movement of desperate despair,—‘Be-think thee of thy words! Remember the old days, . . . have pity’——

She cut short his hesitating speech by an offended gesture, and turning to the women who stood near, exclaimed derisively,

‘Lo, maidens, ’tis Barabbas! Remember ye him who was ever wont to pass by the well in our palm-tree nook in his goings and comings to and from the house of Shadeen?—how he would linger with us till sunset, wasting his time in idle words and rumours of the town, when of a truth he should have been better employed in useful errandry. ’Tis the same knave who knotted for me the silken hammock on the fig-tree boughs in my father’s garden,—and for Aglaie, yonder simpering Greek girl of mine, he once pulled down a flower that blossomed too high for

her to reach. 'Twas all the service he ever did for us, methinks!—yet he hath become of a most excellent pride in prison!—the unexpected freedom given him by the people's vote hath puffed him out with singular vanities! Would ye have known him, maidens, clad thus in purple, and of so decorous a demeanour? As I live, he would have adorned a cross most fittingly!—'twere pity he were not nailed beside the Nazarene!'

The women to whom she spoke laughed carelessly to please her,—but one or two of them seemed sorry for Barabbas, and glanced at him kindly and with a certain pity. He meanwhile showed no anger or impatience at the scoffing words of his beautiful tormentor, but simply looked her straight in the eyes, questioningly and sorrowfully. A deeper flush coloured her fair cheeks,—she was evidently troubled by the steadfastness of his gaze,—and, noting this momentary embarrassment of hers, he seized his opportunity and made a resolute step towards her, catching her hand in his own.

'Is this thy welcome, Judith?' he said in a passionate whisper—'Hast thou no thought of what my

long long misery has been apart from thee? Deny it as thou wilt, I sinned for thy sake and suffered for thy sake!—and 'twas this thought and this alone that made my suffering less hard to bear. Mock me, reject me, thou canst not hinder me from loving thee! Slay me, if it give thee pleasure, with the jewelled dagger hanging at thy girdle, I shall die happy at thy feet,—loving thee to the last, thou cruel virgin of my soul !'

His voice in its very whisper thrilled with the strange music that love can give to the roughest tones,—his black eyes burned with ardour,—and his lips trembled in their eloquent appeal. She heard,—and a slow smile smoothed away the disdain in her face; he had grasped her left hand in his and she did not withdraw it. But with her right she felt for the dagger he spoke of,—it was the merest toy weapon set in a jewelled sheath,—yet sharp and strong enough to kill. Moved by capricious impulse she suddenly drew forth the blade and pointed it at his breast. He did not flinch,—nor did he for a second remove his eyes from the adoring contemplation of her perfect loveliness. For a moment she

remained thus,—the weapon uplifted,—the radiant smile playing round her mouth like a sunbeam playing round a flower,—then, laughing outright and joyously, she thrust back the dagger in its sheath.

‘ For this time I will let thee live ’—she said with an imperial air of condescension—‘ The feast of death to-day hath sufficient material in the traitorous Nazarene and yonder rascal thieves. Only I pray thee loosen my wrist from thy rough grasp, else I must hate thee. Lo, thou hast bruised me, fool !—so rude a touch deserves no pardon ! ’

Her delicate dark brows contracted petulantly. Barabbas gazed remorsefully at the red dents his fingers had made on the velvet softness of her hand, adorned with a few great jewels glistening star-like,—but he said no word,—his heart was beating too painfully and quickly for speech. She, meanwhile, examined minutely the offending marks,—then suddenly raising her eyes with an indescribable witchery of glance and smile, she said,

‘ Gabrias would have kissed it ! ’

Had the ground opened beneath his feet,—had a lightning-bolt sped from heaven, Barabbas could

not have been more amazed and appalled. Gabrias ! The sleek, sanctimonious and false-tongued Pharisee whom he slew and for whose murder he had been cast into prison ! She—Judith—spoke of him thus,—and now ! With his brain in a whirl and a violent fury beginning to stir in his blood, he stared at her, his face livid, his eyes blazing.

‘Gabrias !’ he muttered thickly—‘What sayest thou ?—Gabrias’——

But ere he could finish his incoherent sentence there came a sudden ugly forward rush of the mob, who, growing impatient of restriction, sought to break the line of the soldiery in order to see more clearly the preparations for the death of the ‘Nazarene’ which were now about to commence. There ensued a great noise and calling to order, and a motley scene of confusion, during which a company of imposingly attired personages advanced to the spot where Judith and her women stood, and took up their position there. Among them was the high-priest Caiaphas, whose severely intellectual countenance darkened with wrath as he caught sight of Barabbas.

‘What doest thou here, dog ?’ he demanded, ap-

proaching and addressing him in a fierce whisper—
‘Did I not warn thee? Get thee hence! The law’s release hath not made thee clean of sin,—thou shalt not mingle with the reputable and godly in the land. Get thee hence, I say, or I will make thee accursed in all men’s sight,—yea, even as a leper is accursed!’

His tall form quivered,—and he raised his arm with a gesture of stern menace. Barabbas, pale to the lips, half breathless and giddy with the sickening sensations of doubt and horror which Judith had so unexpectedly raised in his soul, met his cold eyes unflinchingly.

‘Thou insolent priest!’ he said—‘Threaten thy curses to those who fear them,—but I, Barabbas, defy thee! Wherefore should’st thou, liar and hypocrite, sun thyself in the smile of the maiden Iscariot, and I, her friend in olden days, be by thy mandate debarred her company? Verily there is a light beginning to dawn on my foolish and long-darkened brain,—verily I do perceive wherein my trust has been betrayed! I read thy thoughts, thou evil-minded and bloodthirsty Caiaphas! As in a

vision vouchsafed in the silence of the night I see the measure of thy plotting! Look to thyself!—for 'tis not Judas, but *thou* who hast brought to this death the innocent Nazarene,—thou and thy tyrannous craft! Look to thyself,—for as God liveth there is a vengeance waiting for thee and thine!

He spoke at random, hardly conscious of what he said, but carried away by a force and fervour not his own, which made him tremble. Caiaphas retreated, staring at him in dumb rage and amazement,—Judith listening, laughed.

'He hath turned prophet also!' she exclaimed mirthfully—'Let him be crucified!'

Her malicious and cruel suggestion fell on unheeding ears, for just then there was another rush and outcry from the mob, and another futile struggle with the soldiers. Barabbas was compelled to fight with the rest of the reckless crowd for a footing,—and, in the midst of the crush, a strong hand suddenly caught and plucked him as it were out of chaos. Melchior confronted him,—there was a solemn tender look in his eyes,—the ordinary cold composure of his features was softened by deep emotion.

‘Thou poor rash sinner!’ he said, but with great gentleness—‘Thou hast had the first blow on thy credulous man’s heart,—the first blight on thy erring man’s passions! Stay thou now with me, and ache in silence; let the world and its ways sink out of thy sight and memory for a space,—and if thy soul doth crave for Love, come hither and behold it in all its great supernal glory, slain to appease the ravening hate of man!’

His voice, usually so calm, shook as though tears were threatening to overcome it—and Barabbas, troubled, oppressed and smarting with his own sense of wrong, yielded to his touch passively, moved by his words to a certain awe and self-surrender. Lifting his anguished eyes he looked fixedly at his companion,—

‘Tell me the truth now if thou knowest it,’ he said in hoarse accents that were almost inaudible—‘She is false?—yet no! Do not speak! I could not bear it! Let me die rather than lose my faith!’

Melchior made no reply, but simply attended to the difficult business of pushing and pulling him

through the crowd, till they managed at last to find an open spot almost immediately opposite the crosses of the two thieves, who by this time were gasping aloud in the agonies of heat and suffocation, their strained limbs visibly quivering. The men of death were all gathered closely round the tall white figure of the 'Nazarene,'—they were stripping Him of His garments. Meanwhile, Petronius the centurion stood by, watching the process and leaning meditatively on his drawn sword.

'Pilate is crazed!' said an officer, approaching him with a huge parchment scroll—'Lo, what he hath inscribed to be nailed above the cross of the prophet from Galilee!'

Petronius took the scroll and spreading it out, read it slowly and with labour, for he had little scholarship. Three times over were the same words written, in Greek, in Latin, and in Hebrew,—

'JESUS OF NAZARETH,
KING OF THE JEWS.'

'Where see ye any madness in our governor?' demanded Petronius,—'There is naught of such import in the superscription.'

‘Nay, but there is,’—persisted the man who had brought it—‘And so it was pointed out, for Caiaphas spake unto Pilate thus—“*Write not, King of the Jews, but that he said, I am King of the Jews!*” And Pilate, being but newly recovered from his well-nigh deadly swoon, was wroth with Caiaphas, and answered him in haste, saying—“*What I have written, I have written!*” And of a truth they parted ill friends.’

Petronius said no more,—but glanced at the inscription again, and then, advancing, gave it to one of the executioners. This man, grimy and savage-featured, surveyed it with an admiring leer, and flattening it out, began to nail it at once to the top of the great Cross which still lay on the ground where Simon of Cyrene had left it, waiting for its Divine occupant. With a few deft blows he soon fixed it firmly in position, and satisfied with its prominent appearance, he read it with the tardy pains of a child learning its first alphabet. Tracking out each letter with his blood-stained finger, he gradually unsolved for himself the mystic words that have since resounded through the whole civilised world, and muttered them

beneath his breath with a mingling of dull wonder
and scorn,—

‘JESUS OF NAZARETH,
KING OF THE JEWS.’

XV

THE scene had now assumed a wonderful and terrible picturesqueness. The populace, finding that sudden rushes were of no avail to break the firm line of the Roman soldiery, remained wedged together in a sullen heated mass, watching the proceedings in morose silence. There were a few detached groups standing apart from the actual multitude, evidently by permission of the authorities, —one being composed of the poorly-clad women whom Barabbas had seen and spoken to on the way up the hill, and even at the distance he was he could see the golden gleam of the Magdalen's hair, though her face was buried in her hands. And,—for the distraction of his peace, — he could also see the supple form of Judith Iscariot, wrapped in her flame-coloured mantle, and looking like a tall poppy-

flower blossoming in the sun,—the stately Caiaphas stood beside her, with other men of note and position in the city of Jerusalem,—one or two of the stranger Roman nobles had descended from their horses, and were eagerly bending towards her in courtly salutation. Barabbas gazed at her and grew sick at heart,—a horrible disillusion and disappointment crushed his spirit and filled him with a silent rage of pain, an intolerable agony of despair. All at once the ground rocked beneath his feet like a wave of the sea,—he staggered and would have fallen had not his friend Melchior held him up.

‘What is it?’ he muttered, but Melchior replied not. He was looking at the soldiers, who had also felt the sudden billowy movement of the earth on which they stood, but who, trained to a wooden impassiveness, only glanced at one another inquiringly for a second, and then resumed their stiff attitude and immobility of expression. The ground steadied itself as swiftly as it had trembled, and the populace, in their intense excitement, had evidently failed to note its momentary undulation.

Presently a loud roar of ferocious delight went up

from the mob,—the executioners had stripped the Condemned of His garments,—and, pleased with the texture and softness of their material, were now casting lots for their possession. They disputed loudly and angrily, the chief contention raging over the question as to who should have the upper robe or mantle, which was made of pure white wool, woven smoothly throughout from top to hem without seam. Throwing it from hand to hand, they examined the fleecy fabric with covetous eagerness, making clamorous and conflicting assertions as to its actual monetary value, much as the relatives of a dead man squabble over the division of his poor earthly property. And in the meantime, while they argued hotly together and lost patience one with the other, the immortal ‘Nazarene’ stood ungarmented, awaiting their cruel pleasure. His grand Figure shone white as polished alabaster in the brilliant sun,—an inward luminance gleamed like fire through the azure branches of His veins and the spotless purity of His flesh ; His arms had been unbound, and with an air of mingled relief and weariness He stretched them forth as one conscious of pleasant freedom, and

the shadow of their whiteness fell on the dull brown earth like a reflection of the Cross on which He was so soon to perish. And when He allowed them to drop again gently and languidly at His sides, that shadow seemed yet to stay upon the ground, and deepen and darken. No clouds were in the sky; the sun was at full dazzle and splendour,—nevertheless that mysterious stain widened and spread slowly, as though some sudden moisture beneath the soil were gradually rising to an overflow. Barabbas noticed it,—he saw too that Melchior observed the same phenomenon, but neither of them spoke. For the interest and horror of the Divine drama were now culminating to their supremest point;—the casting of lots for the garments of the Condemned was over,—and each man was apparently satisfied with his share of the spoil. The chief executioner, not without a touch of pity in his rough face, approached the ‘Nazarene,’ and instead of using force as he had been compelled to do in the case of the crucified malefactors, bade Him, in a low tone, take His place upon the Cross without offering useless resistance to the law. The terrible mandate was obeyed instantly

and unhesitatingly. With perfect calmness and the serene ease of one who, being tired, is glad to rest, the Ruler of the Worlds laid Himself down within the waiting arms of Death. As peacefully as a weary traveller might stretch himself upon a couch of softest luxury, so did the Conqueror of Time stretch out His glorious limbs upon the knotty wooden beams of torture, with sublime readiness and unconquerable patience. Had He spoken at that thrilling moment, He might have said—‘Even so, O children of My Father, lay yourselves down upon the rack of the world’s mispraisal and contempt! If ye would win a force divine, stretch out your limbs in readiness to be pierced by the nails that shall be driven into them by friends and foes! Wear ye the crown of thorns till the blood starts from your aching brows,—be stripped bare to the malicious gaze of sensuality and sin! Let them think that they have tortured you, slain you, buried you,—hidden you out of sight and out of mind! Then arise, O ye children of My Father,—arise on the wings of the morning, full-filled with power!—power living, everlasting and triumphant!—for ye shall see the world at your feet and all

heaven opened above you; the circling universe shall ring with the music of your names and the story of your faithfulness, and sphere upon sphere of angels shall rejoice with you in glory! For behold, from this day henceforth, I and those whom I call Mine shall alter Death to Life, and Life to Immortality!’

But no words such as these were uttered: the Divine lips were fast closed, and mute as heaven itself. But from the watching crowd there went up a faint murmur of irrepressible admiration for the tranquil heroism with which the young ‘Prophet of Galilee’ accepted His fate, as well as for the singularly sculptural beauty and resignation of His attitude. The executioners approached Him with a certain awe and timorousness.

‘One would think him made of marble,’ muttered one, pausing, hammer in hand.

‘Marble doth not bleed, thou fool!’ said his fellow, harshly, yet with an angry consciousness that he too felt a tremor of fear and repugnance at the work about to be done.

The other men were silent.

The select and richly-attired company of those influential or wealthy persons who were standing immediately round the high-priest Caiaphas, now advanced a little,—and Judith Iscariot, radiant as a sun-flash embodied in woman's shape, leaned forward eagerly with the pleased smile of a child who is promised some rare and mirthful gala show. Her brilliant dark eyes roved indifferently and coldly over the outstretched Form upon the Cross,—her jewelled vest rose and fell lightly with the gradual excited quickening of her breath. She looked,—but she did not speak,—she seemed to gloat silently upon the prospect of the blood-shedding and torture soon to ensue. And from the opposite side to that on which she stood, there suddenly emerged another woman, young and fair as she, though worn with weeping,—a woman whose wild white face was like that of some beautiful sad angel in torment. Throwing up her hands in a dumb frenzy of protest and appeal, she ran unsteadily forward a few steps, then stopped and fell on her knees, covering her anguished features in the loosened shower of her golden hair with a low shuddering cry. None out of the assembled throng

went to offer her comfort or assistance,—people peered curiously at her over each other's shoulders, exchanging a few side-looks of derision and contempt,—but not a soul approached her save one,—one of her own sex, who was closely veiled, and who, advancing with a light yet queenly tread, knelt down beside her, and passing one arm around her, laid her forlorn fair head against her breast and so quietly remained. Judith Iscariot, lifting her ringed hand to her eyes to shade them from the sun's glare, gazed at that kneeling group of two with haughty disgust and scorn.

'Lo, the sinners with whom this madman of Galilee consorted!' she exclaimed to Caiaphas—'Yonder yellow-haired vileness is the Magdalen,—she should be stoned from hence!'

'Yea verily she should be stoned from any place where thou dost pass, fair Judith!' said Caiaphas deferentially, yet with the shadow of a sneer on his thin pale lips—'Evil company should be far distant from thee, and for this cause did I just lately chase the insolent Barabbas from thy presence. But concerning this woman Magdalen, yonder matron who doth thus embrace her, cannot immediately be spoken

with or banished from this place, for 'tis the Mother of the Galilean. She hath come hither to behold him die. Were we to visit her with harshness, or deny and deprive her of her privilege to watch this death and make fitting lament thereon, she, and the women she elects as friends,—the populace would raise an outcry against us, and most justly. For law must ever go hand in hand with mercy. Have patience then, good Judith, till the end,—though of a truth I crave to know why thou hast ventured hither if thou art offended at the sight of sinners? In such a multitude as this thou canst not hope to find all virtuous!’

Something sarcastic in the tone of his voice called up a sudden red flush on Judith's cheeks,—but her eyes grew cold and hard as a midnight frost.

‘I,—like the mother of the Nazarene, have come to see him die!’ she said with a cruel smile,—‘She will watch his torture with tears doubtless,—but I, with laughter! His agony will be my joy! For I hate him,—I hate him! He hath cast dissension in our house,—he hath turned my brother's heart from mine, and made of him a slave to his fanatic doctrine.

For look you, what happier man was there than Judas, beloved of my father, and dear to me beyond all earthly countings, till in an evil hour he was ensnared from home by idle rumours of the power of this boastful prophet of Galilee? What needed we of any new religion,—we who served the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, and who had followed the teachings of the law from our youth up till now? Is it not a shame to speak it, a shame to think it, that Judas, well-born and comely of countenance, my father's only son and heir, hath actually wandered in vagabondage across the land with this carpenter's son of Nazareth, dwelling among common fisher-folk, visiting the unclean and leprous poor, eating the husks of want instead of the bread of plenty,—deserting his home, forsaking me, his sister, and disobeying his father's command, all for the sake of this impostor who hath at last been found guilty of blasphemy and condemned to his long-deserved death. Judge how I hate the traitor! Ay, with a hate surpassing any love! I rose betimes this morning to be the witness of his trial,—when the mob were inclined to pity, I whispered words that roused them anew to wrath,—

'twas I who gave the keynote "Crucify him!"—didst thou not mark how readily the chorus answered?'

Caiaphas looked down a trifle uneasily, then up again.

'Yea, I did mark it,'—he said softly—'And that I heard and knew thy voice is no matter for surprise, seeing that it was a strain of music amid much discord. And freely do I sympathise with thy sorrow concerning Judas,—thy brother was ever thy dear and favourite companion, and this Galilean miracle-monger hath brought him naught save ruin. He hath fled the city, they say. Knowest thou whither?'

A vague anxiety shadowed the beautiful face he watched so narrowly.

'Nay, not I,' she answered, and her accents trembled, 'Last night he came to me,—'twas after he had led the guards to the garden of Gethsemane where they captured the Nazarene,—and like a madman, he called down curses upon himself and me. He was distraught,—I knew him not,—he raged and swore. I strove to calm him,—he thrust me from him,—I called him by every endearing name, but

he was as one deaf to affection or to reason ;—I bade him think of our dead mother, how she loved him,—he shrieked at me as though I had plunged a dagger in his heart. Our father besought him with tears to remember all the claims of family and duty, but still he raved and beat his breast, crying aloud “I have sinned! I have sinned! The weight of heaven and earth crushes my soul—the innocent blood is red upon my hands! I have sinned! I have sinned!” Then with a sudden violence he flung us from him, and rushed furiously from our dwelling out into the night. I followed him fast, hoping to stay him ere he could have left our garden,—but his was a crazed speed,—I found him not. The moon was shining and the air was still,—but he had gone,—and since then I have not seen him.’

Two tears quivered on her silky lashes and fell among the jewels at her breast. A gathering trouble darkened the high-priest’s countenance.

‘’Tis strange,’ he muttered — ‘’Tis very strange! He hath fulfilled a duty to the laws of his people, and now, when all is done, he should rejoice and not lament. Nevertheless, be sure his humour is but

temporarily distracted, though I recognise the actual cause thou hast for sisterly misgiving. Yet take thou comfort in believing all is well,—and let thy thirst of vengeance now be satisfied, for see, they do begin to nail the malefactor down.’

He spoke thus, partly to divert Judith’s thoughts from anxiety on her brother’s account, and partly because just then he saw Petronius the centurion give the fatal signal. Petronius had in truth purposely delayed this act till the last possible moment, and now, when he was finally compelled to lift his gauntleted hand in sign that the terrible work of torture should commence, he caught, for the further inward distress and remorse of his mind, a sudden look from the patient, upturned, Divine eyes. Such eyes!—shining like twin stars beneath the grand supernal brows, round which the rose-thorns pressed their piercing circlet,—eyes alit with some supreme inscrutable secret spell that had the power to shake the spirit of the strongest man. Petronius could not bear those eyes,—their lustrous purity and courage were too much for his composure,—and trembling from head to foot with an almost womanish nervous-

ness, he turned abruptly away. The murmuring noise of the vast expectant multitude died off gradually like the retreating surge of a distant sea,—a profound silence reigned,—and the hot movelessness of the air grew more and more weightily intensified. The executioners having received their commands, and overcoming their momentary hesitation, gathered in a rough half-nude group around the Cross whereon lay unresistingly the Wonder of the Ages, and knelt to their hideous task, their muscular brown arms, grimy with dust and stained already with splashes of blood from the crucifying of the two thieves, contrasting strangely with the dazzling whiteness of the Figure before them. They paused a moment, holding the huge long-pointed nails aloft; . . . would this Man of Nazareth struggle?—would it be needful to rope His limbs to the wooden beams as they had done to the other two condemned? With the fierce scrutiny of those accustomed to signs of rebellion in the tortured, they studied their passive Captive, . . . not a quiver stirred the firmly composed limbs, . . . not a shade of anxiety or emotion troubled the fair face, . . . while the eyes,

rolled up to the blinding splendour of the sky, were gravely thoughtful and full of peace. No bonds were needed here ;—the Galilean was of marvellously heroic mould,—and every hardened torturer around Him, silently in his heart of hearts recognised and respected the fact. Without further parley they commenced their work, . . . and the startled earth, affrighted, groaned aloud in cavernous echoes as the cruel hammers heavily rose and fell, clanging out the tocsin of a God's death and a world's redemption. And at the self-same moment, up to the far star-girdled Throne of the Eternal, sped the tender low-breathed supplication of the dying Well-Beloved,

'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do !'

XVI

A DREADFUL hush of horror reigned. The stirless heat of the atmosphere felt as heavy to the senses as an overhanging solid mass of burning iron. The forces of Nature seemed paralysed, as though some sudden shock had been dealt at the core of life, or as though the rolling world had paused, palpitating for breath in its pacing round the sun. Not a sound broke the oppressive stillness save the dull reverberation of the hammers at their deadly business,—for the vast human multitude stood dumb, sullenly watching the working of their will, yet moved by a vague remorse and an equally vague terror. Not one among them would have dared to suggest at this late hour any mercy for the Victim ; they, the people, had desired this thing, and their desire was being accomplished. All being

carried out as they wished, they could not well complain, nor could they recall their own decision. But there was something unnatural and ghastly in the scene,—a chill sense of nameless desolation began to creep upon the air,—and while each man and woman present strained both body and sight to see the fine fair limbs of the ‘Galilean’ pierced through and fastened to the torture-tree, they were all conscious of fear ; fear of what or of whom, none could have truly told,—nevertheless fear dominated and daunted the spirits of every one. And it was this unconfessed inexplicable alarm that kept them silent,—so that not even a whispered ‘Alas!’ escaped from any pitying voice when the beautifully arched, delicate feet of the Divine Sufferer were roughly seized, crossed over and held in position by one executioner, while another placed the nail in the nerve-centres of the tender flesh. A third callous ruffian dealt the measured blows which drove in the thick, sharp iron prong with a slow force calculated to double and treble the exquisite agony of lingering martyrdom,—and swiftly the hurt veins rebelled against their wrong in bursting jets of innocent blood. The crimson stain

welled up and made a piteous rose on the torn skin's whiteness, but He who was thus wounded, stirred not at all, nor uttered a cry. His human flesh mutely complained of human injustice in those reproachful red life-drops ; but the indomitable Spirit that dwelt within that flesh made light of merely mortal torment, and was already seizing Death in the grasp of victory. And the feet that had borne their Owner into dreary, forsaken ways where the poor and the outcast dwell in sorrow,—that had lightly paused among the 'lilies of the field' while such sweet words were spoken as made these simple flowers talismans of grace for ever,—that had moved softly and tenderly through the fields of corn and gardens of olive, and villages and towns alike, carrying consolation to the sad, hope to the lost, strength to the weak,—now throbbed and ached and bled in anguish for man's ingratitude, man's forgetfulness, man's abhorrence of the truth, and suicidal doubt of God. How easy it is to hate! . . . how difficult to love, as Love demands! . . . Many assembled there on Calvary that never-to-be-forgotten day, had listened to the fearless and holy teaching of Him whose torment they now coldly watched, when

in the fields, on the hills, or by the reverent sea, He had taught them the startling new lesson that '*God is a Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.*' No savage 'Jehovah-Jireh,' craving for murder and thirsting for vengeance was the supreme Creator, but a Father,—a loving Father, of whom this youthful Prophet with the heaven-lit eyes had said—'*Fear not, little flock!—it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom!*' He,—this Man upon the Cross,—had on one memorable morning, gathered about Him a crowd of the fallen and sick and poor and disconsolate, and with a tender smile as radiant as the summer sunshine, had said—'*Come unto Me, all ye that are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest!*' . . . And they had come,—those heart-broken and agonised of the earth,—they had knelt and wept at His feet,—they had kissed His garments and the ground on which He trod,—they had placed their little children in His arms, and had told Him all their sorrows. And He had laid His hands upon them in blessing,—those fair white hands of mystic power and healing, which dispensed naught but good,—but which now, palms

outward, were fastened to the death-rack, . . . a symbolic token of the world's reward to all its noblest souls! . . . The blood oozed slowly and reluctantly from those hands, but, as was usual in the dolours of crucifixion, gathered itself painfully in the outstretched arms,—swelling the veins and knotting the muscles,—though as yet the terrible ordeal had not reached its height, for the Cross had still to be lifted. For that tremendous uplifting the whole universe waited,—for that, the very heavens were at pause and the angels stricken dumb!

The executioners having finished the first part of their task, now beckoned the centurion to step forward and see for himself that the nails in the Victim's body were secure, so that he might be able to certify to the authorities that the law had been adequately fulfilled. With a sickening heart, Petronius obeyed the signal. But his sight was dazzled,—his brain reeled,—there was a choking dryness in his throat, and he could not speak a word. Yet this time the Man of Sorrows never looked at him,—the Divine orbs of light and genius were turned to heaven alone, as though absorbing the fiery glory of the sun. And,

—was it fancy, or some delusion of his own sense of vision that suddenly gave him the impression of an approaching darkness in the sky?—as if indeed the sun were losing lustre? He rubbed his eyes and gazed dubiously about,—surely a mysterious shadow as of outspread wings rested on the landscape! Were the people,—were the soldiers conscious of this? Apparently not. Their attention was concentrated on the work of death,—and there was a general eager forward movement of the crowd to see the Cross set up. As Petronius, dazed and bewildered, stepped back, the executioners, six in all, men of sinewy and powerful build, bent themselves energetically to the completion of their work, . . . in vain! Their united forces could not raise the world's Eternal Symbol one inch from the ground! They struggled and dragged at it, the sweat pouring from their brows,—but its priceless freight of Godhead, Majesty and Love resisted all their efforts.

‘I said he was a Hercules,’ growled the chief man, wringing the perspiration from his rough beard,—
‘The Cross itself is of uncommon size, and he upon

it hath the mould of heroes. What, Simon! Simon of Cyrene! Art thou there?’

The crowd moved and murmured, and made way, —and Simon, thus apostrophised, came slowly to the front.

‘What need ye more of me?’ he demanded sullenly, ‘Think ye I will aid in murder?’

‘Thou Libyan ass!’ retorted the executioner—‘Who talks of murder? This is the law’s work, not ours. Lend us thy brawny arms a minute’s space,—thou art made in a giant’s shape, and should’st have a giant’s force withal. An’ thou wilt not’—he added in a lower tone—‘we must use greater roughness.’

Simon hesitated,—then, as if inwardly compelled, advanced submissively to the foot of the Cross. His eyes were cast down, and he bit his lips to hide their nervous trembling.

‘Lift ye all together the upper beams’—he said softly to the executioners, hushing his voice like one who speaks in rapture or in reverence—‘I will support the end.’

They stared amazedly,—he was voluntarily choosing the greater weight which would inevitably be his to

bear directly the Cross was raised. But they offered no opposition. Stronger than any lion he was known to be,—let him test his strength now, for here was his opportunity! So they thought as they went in the direction he indicated,—three men to the right and three to the left. The excitement of the people was now intense,—so passionately absorbed indeed had it become, that none seemed to be aware of a singular circumstance that with each moment grew more pronounced and evident,—this was the solemn spreading of a semi-darkness which, like advancing twilight, began gradually to blot out all the brilliant blue of the afternoon skies. It came on stealthily and almost imperceptibly,—but the crowd saw nothing as yet, . . . nothing but the huge bronzed figure of Simon stooping to lift the Crucified. Tenderly, and with a strange air of humiliation, the rough-featured black-browed Cyrenian laid hands upon the Cross once more,—the Cross he had so lightly borne to Calvary,—and grasping it firmly, drew it up; up by slow and sure degrees, till the pierced and bleeding feet of the Christ came close against his straining breast, . . . inch by inch, with panting breath and an ardent force

that was more like love than cruelty, he lifted it higher and higher from the ground, the executioners holding and guiding the transverse beams upward till these were beyond their reach,—and Simon alone, with wildly beating heart and muscles stretched nigh to breaking, supported for one lightning instant the world's Redeemer in his arms! He staggered and groaned,—the blood rushed to his face and the veins in his forehead swelled, . . . but he held his ground for that one terrific moment, . . . then, . . . a dozen men rushed excitedly to his assistance, and with their aid, the great Cross, with the greatest Love transfixed upon it, was thrust into the deep socket dug for its reception on the summit of the hill. It fell in with a thudding reverberation as though its end had struck the very centre of the earth,—and trembling to and fro for a few seconds like a tree shaken by a storm-wind, was soon perfectly still, fixed steadily upright between the two already crucified thieves, who though dying fast, were not yet dead. Salvation's Symbol stood declared ;—and Simon of Cyrene, having done all he was needed to do, retreated slowly with faltering steps and swimming brain, conscious only of

one thing,—that the blood of the Victim had stained his breast, and that the stain seemed to burn his flesh like fire. He folded his garment over it to hide it, as though it were a magic talisman which must for safety's sake be well concealed ; it gave him pain as much as if he had himself been wounded, . . . and yet . . . it was a pang that thrilled and warmed his soul ! He saw nothing,—the earth appeared to eddy round him like a wave,—but he stumbled on blindly, heedless of whither he went, and forcing his way through the crowd that gaped at him in wonderment, the while he muttered from time to time under his breath the words of the inscription above the head of the Divine Martyr,

‘ JESUS OF NAZARETH, KING OF THE JEWS ! ’

And now, the Cross being openly set up, and the slow devourings of death having commenced upon the sinless Sacrifice, a long wild shout of savage exultation arose from the multitude,—a shout that rang in harsh hoarse echoes over the hill, through the low-lying gardens beyond, and away as it seemed to the summit of Mount Moriah, where over Solomon's glistening Temple, a cloud as of dust or smoke, hung

Herod's

like a warning of storm and fire. And the barbaric human clamour as it mutteringly died away, was suddenly taken up and all unexpectedly answered by a grander uproar,—a deep, threatening boom of far-off thunder. In circling tones and semi-tones of wrath it volleyed through the skies,—and, startled by the sound, the people, roused for the first time from their morbid engrossment in the work of cruel torture and blood-shedding, looked up and saw that the heavens were growing dark and that the sun was nearly covered by an inky black cloud, from which its rim peered feebly like a glimmering half-moon. Against the background of that obscured sun and sable cloud, the Cross stood clear, the outstretched Figure on it, looking, in that livid murkiness, whiter than a shape of snow,—and the multitude silenced anew by some strange terror, watched and listened,—chained in their thousands to the one spot by mingled fear and fascination. Afraid to move they knew not why, and waiting for they knew not what, they gazed all with one accord at the huge Cross and its emblazoned Glory, suspended between them and the pallidly vanishing sun,—and murmured to one

another vaguely between-whiles of storm and rain,—there would be a heavy shower, they said,—good for the land and cooling to the air. But they spoke at random,—their thoughts were not with their words, and their minds were ill at ease. For the omnipresent spirit of fear, like a chill wind, breathed upon their nerves, lifting the very hair of their flesh, and causing their limbs to tremble. And ever the skies darkened ; and ever, with scarce a moment's pause, the gathering thunders rolled.

XVII

DEEPER and deeper drooped the dull grey gloom, like a curtain falling slowly and impenetrably over all things. The strange stillness of the multitude, . . . the heavy breathlessness of the air, . . . and the appalling effect of the three crosses with the tortured figures on them, standing out against the lurid storm-light, were sufficient to inspire a sense of awe and dread in the mind of the most hardened and callous beholder. The booming thunder swinging to and fro in the clouds resembled the sepulchral sound of an iron-tongued funeral bell, half muffled, half clamant, . . . and presently the landscape took upon itself a spectral look, as of being a dream scene unsubstantially formed of flitting vapour. The circling line of the Roman soldiery appeared to lessen to the merest thread of

gleaming steel,—the serried ranks of the populace merged into a confused, apparently intangible blur,—and in the singular flitting and wavering of light and shade, it happened that at last only the one central Cross became pre-eminently visible. Outlined with impressive distinctness, it suddenly seemed to assume gigantic proportions, stretching interminably as it were to east and west, up to heaven and down to earth, while behind the head of the Divine Crucified a golden peak of the veiled sun shone like the suggestion of a new world bursting into being. One instant this weird glamour lasted, . . . and then a blue blaze of lightning cut up the sky into shreds and bars, followed instantaneously by a terrific clap of thunder. Men grew pale, . . . women screamed ; even the soldiers lost their wonted composure, and looked at each other in doubting and superstitious dread. For they had their gods, these rough untutored men,—they believed in the angers of Jupiter,—and if the fierce god's chariot-wheels were rattling through the far empyrean thus furiously, surely his wrath would soon exceed all bounds ! And could it be because the 'Nazarene' was cruci-

fied? Their darkening countenances, full of apprehension, expressed their thoughts, and the high-priest Caiaphas, quick to detect the least hint of a change in the popular sentiment, became uneasy. This storm commencing at the very moment of the crucifixion, might so impress and terrify the ignorant rabble, that they might imagine the death of the Galilean Prophet was being visited on them by the powers of heaven,—and possibly might insist on having Him taken down from the Cross after all. He imparted his politic fears to Judith Iscariot in a whisper,—she too had grown pale at the loud threat of the gathering storm, and was not without a nervous sense of alarm,—but she was prouder than most of her sex, and scorned to outwardly show any misgiving, whatever she inwardly felt. And while Caiaphas yet murmured discreetly in her ear, a sudden glow as of fire was flung upon Calvary,—the sable mask of cloud slid from the sun,—and wide rays of light, tinged with a singular redness like that of an out-breaking volcano, blazed forth brilliantly over the hill. Cheered by the splendour, the people threw off, in part, their vague terrors,—their faces

brightened,—and Caiaphas profiting by his opportunity, stepped out in full view of the crowd, and advanced majestically towards the Cross from which the ‘King of the Jews’ looked down upon him. Lifting his hand to shade his eyes from the crimson glare which haloed with a burning ring the outstretched patient Figure, he exclaimed in clear loud accents—‘*Thou that destroyest the temple and buildest it in three days, save thyself and come down from the cross !*’

The multitude heard, and roared applause and laughter. Even the grim soldiers smiled — for, thought they, if the Man of Galilee were a true miracle-worker, He could never have a better opportunity for displaying His powers than now. Caiaphas smiled proudly,—he had struck the right note, and had distracted the attention of the mob from their personal alarms of the storm, to renewed interest in the cruelty that was being enacted. Still standing before the Cross, he studied with placid pitilessness every outline of the perfect Human Shape in which Divine Glory was concealed,—and watched with the scientific interest of a merciless torturer the gradual

welling up and slow dropping of blood from the wounded hands and feet,—the pained, patient struggling of the quickened breath,—the pale parted lips,—the wearily-drooping, half-closed eyes. Annas, sleek and sly, with an air of hypocritical forbearance and compassion, approached also, and looked up at the same piteous spectacle. Then, rubbing his hands gently together, he said softly, yet distinctly—

‘He saved others,—himself he cannot save! If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him!’

The dying thief Hanan, now in the last stage of his agony, caught these words, and twisting himself fiercely forward, muttered groans and hideous curses. His neck swelled,—his tongue protruded,—and the frightful effort he made to speak distorted his whole repulsive countenance, while his body, agitated by muscular twitchings, violently shook the cross on which he was roped and nailed.

‘Thou blasphemer!’ he gasped at last, rolling his fierce eyes round, and fixing them on the fair thorn-crowned Head that with every moment drooped lower and lower,—‘Well it is that thou should’st

die, . . . yet willingly would I have seen Barabbas nailed where thou art! Nevertheless thou art a false and evil prophet,—*if thou be the Christ, save thyself and us!*'

The other crucified malefactor, close upon his end, and panting out his life in broken breaths of anguish, suddenly writhed himself upward against his cross, and forced himself to lift his heavy head.

'Hanan!' he muttered hoarsely, '*Dost thou not fear God? . . . Seeing thou art in the same condemnation?*' He broke off, struggling against the suffocation in his throat, then continued to murmur incoherently,—'*And we indeed justly, . . . for we receive the due reward of our deeds, . . . but this Man hath done nothing amiss.*'

Again he stopped. All at once a great wonder, rapture and expectation flashed into his livid face and lightened his glazing eyes. He uttered a loud cry, turning himself with all his strength towards the silent Christ.

'*Lord . . . Lord*' . . . he stammered feebly, '*Remember me . . . when . . . Thou comest . . . into . . . Thy Kingdom!*'

Slowly,—with aching difficulty, but with unquerably tender patience, the Divine Head was gently raised,—the lustrous suffering eyes bent their everlasting love upon him,—and a low voice, hushed and sad, yet ever musical, responded,—

' Verily I say unto thee,—This day shalt thou be with Me in Paradise !'

And as the wondrous promise reached his ears, the tortured and repenting sinner smiled,—the anguish passed away from his features, leaving them smooth and calm,—and with one faint groan his head fell heavily forward on his chest, . . . his limbs ceased trembling, . . . he was dead. Hanan still lingered in the throes of reluctant dissolution,—his awful struggle having become a mere savage revolt of material nature, from which the strongest turned away their eyes, shuddering.

Another reverberating crash of thunder bellowed through the sky; this time the earth rocked in answer, and the people were seized anew with dread. Caiaphas, self-possessed and full of dignity, still held his ground, ready to face and quell any fresh superstitious alarms, inviting by his very attitude as it

were, all the world to bear witness to the justice of the law's condemnation. Pointing upward to the Cross, he cried aloud,—

‘He trusted in God! Let Him deliver him now if He will have him; for he said, I am the Son of God!’

But the multitude were not so ready to respond as before,—they were troubled by forebodings and fears which they could not explain,—and their eyes were not so much fixed on the crucified ‘Nazarene’ as on the sun behind Him,—the sun which now looked like a strange new planet coloured a blackish red. They were also noting the conduct of a small brown bird, which had settled on the Cross, and was now desperately plucking with its tiny beak at the crown of thorns that circled the bleeding brows of the ‘King.’ A soldier threw a stone at it,—it flew away, but swiftly returned to resume its singular, self-appointed task. Again and again it was driven off,—and again and again it came back fearlessly, fluttering round the shining Head of the Christ, and striving, as it seemed, to tear off the thorny coronal. Its feeble but heroic efforts were rewarded by one upward

glance from the loving eyes of the Beloved,—and then the innocent feathered creature, mournfully chirping, flew away for the last time, its downy breast torn and stained with blood, but otherwise uninjured.

This trifling incident gave a singular emotion of pleasure to the crowd. They found something touching and dramatic in it,—and the bird's wound of love elicited far more sympathy than the speechless and supernal sorrows of the Man Divine. Compassion and interest for birds and animals and creeping things of the wood and field often distinguish the otherwise selfish and cold-hearted ; and many a man has been known to love a dog when in human relationships he would willingly slander his friend or slay his brother.

Again a shaft of lightning flashed through the heavens, followed by a lion-like hungry roar of thunder, and many of the people began to move to and fro troublously, and turn their eyes from the hill city-wards in alarm and anxiety. All at once in the full red glare of the volcanic sun Judith Iscariot ran forward excitedly, her flame-coloured mantle falling

away from her tawny gold tresses, her lips parted in a smile, her glowing exquisite face upturned, and the jewels on her attire gleaming with lurid sparks like the changing hues of a serpent's throat. Lifting up her round white arm, ablaze with gems from wrist to shoulder, she pointed derisively at the dying Christ and laughed,—then making an arch of her two hands above her mouth so that her voice might carry to its farthest, she cried aloud to Him mockingly,—

‘If thou be the Son of God, come down from the Cross!’

The words rang out with vibrating distinctness, clear as a bell, and Barabbas, though he was at some distance off, heard them, and saw that it was Judith who spoke. Moved to an unspeakable horror and dismay, he rushed towards her, scarcely knowing what he did, but full of the idea that he must stop her cruel, unwomanly gibing,—must drag her away, by sheer force if necessary, from the position she had taken up below the Cross. Her beautiful figure standing there looked strange and devilish,—her red mantle caught blood-like gleams from the red sun,—

above her the tortured limbs of the God-Man shone marble white and almost luminous, while His dreamful face drooped downward now had upon it a stern shadow like the solemn unspoken pronouncement of an eternal reproach and doom. And the radiant mirthful malice of the woman's eyes flashed up at that austere sublime countenance in light scorn and ridicule, as with shriller yet still silver-sounding utterance she cried again,—

‘Hearest thou me, thou boaster and blasphemer?
If thou be the Son of God, come down from the Cross!’

As the wicked taunt left her lips for the second time, a twisted and broken flash of lightning descended from heaven like the flaming portion of a destroyed planet, and striking straight across the scarlet ball of the sun, seemed literally to set the Cross on fire. Blazing from end to end of its transverse beams in a flare of blue and amber, it poured lurid reflections on all sides, illumining with dreadful distinctness the pallid shape of the Man of Sorrows for one ghastly instant, and then vanished, chased into retreat by such a deafening clatter and

clash of thunder as seemed to split a thousand rolling worlds in heaven. At the same moment the earth heaved up, and appeared to stagger like a ship in a wild sea, . . . and with a sudden downward swoop as of some colossal eagle, dense darkness fell,—impenetrable, sooty darkness, that in one breath of time blotted out the face of nature and made of the summer-flowering land a blind black chaos.

END OF VOLUME I.

It is, and always has been, a matter of amazement to me that Miss Marie Corelli should misconstrue, as she so obviously does, the motives of literary criticism. She affects to doubt its sincerity, and falls into the grave error of supposing—or pretending to suppose—that all unfavourable comments on her works are dictated by envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. Her article in this week's "Figaro," on "My Public and I," affords one more proof of what must be called her almost childish feeling upon this matter. I am certainly inclined to think that by the writing of such articles as this she must do herself considerably more harm than good, even in the eyes of her admirers.

"BARABBAS": A DREAM OF THE WORLD'S TRAGEDY.—Miss Corelli is well known as the most imaginative novelist of the day, but never before in the highest flights of her imagination has she reached anything like "Barabbas." It was a daring thing to do, thus to write the narrative of the Passion of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ; it was a still more daring thing to read into the sacred story incidents and characters which appear not in Holy Writ. But Miss Corelli has surmounted all obstacles, and by her genius has made her difficult task a success. The keynote of the book is struck in the following quotation from St. Matthew's Gospel:—"And they consulted how they might take Him by subtily." In the opinion of Miss Corelli, "subtily" suggests the presence of a woman; and the part which the beautiful traitress Judith Iscariot is made to play in the Great Betrayal is shadowed with considerable skill. Barabbas, also, in the hands of this consummate artist, stands forth as a living, striking figure—a character which has much innate nobility, despite its faults. But the interest of the book centres in the opening chapters and around the sublime figure of Christ. To many it must seem irreverent, nay, blasphemous, to drag the grandest incident of the whole history of the world into a novel. To such we would say, reserve judgment until you read the book. The dignity and reserve with which the Son of Man is surrounded dispels much of these objections. It is hardly possible to be more reverent than Miss Corelli is in her treatment of the great theme she has taken in hand. No words are put into our Lord's mouth save those given in the Gospels, though certain liberties are taken with the sacred narrative. Matter is added, matter which for vividness of word-painting has seldom been surpassed, but there is no tampering with the essence of sublime story. The description of the scenes of the Passion recall vividly the Ober-Ammergau Passion Play. In that, as in this, everything depends upon the way in which the holy theme is handled. It may do good, it may do much harm. "Barabbas," we think, can hardly do harm; it may even do much good to the careless and the heedless, who, through the medium of this book, may have the great truth of the Atonement brought home to them. The other characters are devoutly treated, especially the Blessed Virgin, who is ideally represented. It is impossible within the limits of a brief review to quote freely from this striking work. Yet the following passage descriptive of Christ before Pilate will give an idea of the style:—"Still as a statue of sunlit marble He stood, erect and calm, His white garments flowing backwards from His shoulders in even picturesque folds, thus displaying His bare rounded arms, crossed now on His breast in a restful attitude of resignation, yet in their very inertness suggesting such a mighty muscular power as would have befitted a Hercules. Power, grandeur, authority and invincible supremacy were all silently expressed in His marvellous and incomparable presence—and while Barabbas still stared fascinated, awed and troubled in his mind, 'though he knew not why,' the shouts of the populace broke forth again with hoarser reiteration, and more impatient ferocity: 'Away with Him! Away with Him! Let Him be crucified!' And far back from the edge of the crowd, a woman's voice, sweet and shrill and piercing, soared up, and rang out with a cruel music over all the deeper uproar: 'Crucify Him! Crucify Him!'"

"Alike the most reviled, the best praised, and the widest read book of the day."—WORLD.

"The tender reverence of the treatment, and the imaginative beauty of the writing, have reconciled us to the daring of the conception, and the conviction is forced on us that even so exalted a subject cannot be made too familiar to us, provided it be presented in the true spirit of Christian faith. The amplifications of the Scripture narrative are often conceived with high poetic insight, and this 'Dream of the World's Tragedy' is, despite some trifling incongruities, a lofty and not inadequate paraphrase of the supreme climax of the inspired narrative."—DUBLIN REVIEW.

"By the dignity of its conceptions, the reserve round the central figure, and the fine imagery of the scene and circumstance, it has a far-off likeness to Ammergau Play. The studies of character are very striking. There is much that is elevating and devout in this remarkable work."—GUARDIAN.

"The most ambitious flight of a novelist who has crowds of devoted admirers. An honest endeavour by one who has more than conventional reverence to tell the story so that it shall be read again with open and attentive eyes."—CHRISTIAN WORLD.

"It is human, broad-based on the rock of our common nature, appealing to what is best in it."—ILLUSTRATED CHURCH NEWS.

"The subject is treated with great reverence, and the expansion of the Scripture narrative is marked with vivid imaginative force. The author has not put into the lips of Christ any words other than those to be found in our Bibles. The story is told with much intensity and with opulence of imaginative power."—BIRMINGHAM DAILY POST.

THE REVIEWERS REVIEWED.

See this month's "Idler" for "Barabbas,—and After," by MARIE CORELLI.

"Those who read Miss Corelli's article in the *Idler* will do well to remember the brutal treatment to which she has been subjected by the Press. Some of the reviews of 'Barabbas' were a disgrace to journalism."—LITERARY WORLD.

"This clever author turns the tables completely on her reviewers. Many of the attacks upon 'Barabbas' were both stupid and brutal, and deserve all the scorn and contempt heaped upon them by the writer of that remarkable and very beautiful 'Dream of the World's Tragedy.'"—LADY'S PICTORIAL.

"Contains some very plain words for the critics who will have to acknowledge that this author knows how to wield a vigorous pen."—GENTLEWOMAN.

"One of the severest things we have ever read. The loose and unjust manner in which the bulk of the critics dealt with this work is unsparingly exposed. . . . A fearful indictment against the literary honesty of a host of professional reviewers, and, as such, a painful eye-opener to readers who look to reviewers for guidance in the selection of books."—BOSTON (Lincolnshire) INDEPENDENT.

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